

**A HERMENEUTICAL KEY TO THE ASCETIC
IDEAL OF SAINT EPHREM**

**A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Theology University of St. Michael's College
and the History Department of the Toronto School of Theology. In partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Theology
awarded by the University of St. Michael's College.**

BRENT HAROLD JEWELL

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A HERMENEUTICAL KEY TO THE ASCETIC IDEAL OF SAINT EPHREM

MASTER OF ARTS IN THEOLOGY, 2004

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of History, Toronto School of Theology**

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the ascetic ideal of Ephrem the Syrian (306/07 – 373 C.E.) as manifested in his hymns, homilies, and prose works. The image of Ephrem that has come down through history is of a monk cloistered in a cell. However, this image is entirely anachronistic as Ephrem belonged to a native proto-monastic tradition that existed in Syria prior to the import of the Egyptian ascetic tradition.

This thesis proposes that the ascetic ideal of Saint Ephrem is inherently tied to the notion of the *ihîdāyā*: a 'single' or 'celibate' person living a life in full imitation of Christ. This ideal manifests itself in his writings through the traditional ascetic themes of virginity, baptism, celibacy, sexuality, and the body. Thus, not only does Ephrem's concern for the perfect life in Christ reveal his ascetic ideal, but it also connects him to the Syrian proto-monastic tradition.

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I. Introduction

I.1 – Ephrem and the study of Early Syrian Asceticism

The traditional approach to Christian antiquity has been to divide its world into the Greek East and the Latin West. This bias not only favours the Greek and Latin experience of Christianity, with all its nuances, but, as Joseph Amar notes, this simplified perspective obscures a most obvious fact: “Christianity dawned in neither a European nor a Greek or Latin cultural setting; its origins are Near Eastern and Semitic.”¹ This skewed perspective has a long history in Patristic studies, especially in the study of early Christian asceticism and monasticism. This is no more evident than in the two most common or customary generalizations concerning the origins of Christian monasticism: the Egyptian desert as its birth-place; and that the solitary life of hermits came before the communal arrangements of Pachomian coenobitism.² As we shall see, the example of Ephrem as an ascetic is contrary to both of these understandings: he was of the Syrian Orient and remained there his entire life, in an urban setting, within a highly devoted Christian community.

As a result, at the expense of the Syrian Orient and its own native ascetical movement, early Christian asceticism is more commonly examined in light of the Latin and Greek literature. This is somewhat understandable given that the history of Syriac Christian asceticism from the mid fifth-century CE onward loses its distinctive character and assumes a Greek quality in its expression. This picture of the Syrian ascetical world is reflected in the histories of Sozomen, Palladius, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus.

¹ Joseph P. Amar, “Perspective on the Eucharist in Ephrem the Syrian,” *Worship* 61 (September 1987): 441.

² Thomas Kathanar Koonammakkal, “Ephrem’s Ideas on Singleness,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 2:1 (January 1999), [e-journal] <<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Koonammakkal.html>> (accessed 12 February 2004).

Furthermore, one only has to examine the sixth-century C.E. *vita* of Saint Ephrem to see how it resembles Athanasius' characterization of the Antonite hermit or anchorite.

Consequently, the history of asceticism in Syria is often noted for its severe forms of penance or discipline, such as the stylites or 'pillar-saints,' and those monks who burdened themselves with heavy chains. For example, Theodoret of Cyrrhus in his *A History of the Monks of Syria* relates numerous stories of monks and their extreme ascetic behaviour:

Having become an emulator of his virtue, the wonderful Eusebius continued to wear away his body by still more labors. Although wearing one hundred and twenty pounds of iron, he laid on himself the other fifty of the most godly Agapetus and also added the eighty of the great Marcianus. He had as his oratory and dwelling a certain cistern that lacked water, living in this way for a total of three years. I have made this digression wishing to show for how many others the great Marcianus was the cause of great achievements.³

Likewise:

First, immuring himself for a long time in a cell, he enjoyed divine consolation alone, and constructing out of wood a small chest that did not even match his body, in this he dwelt, obliged to stoop the whole time – for its length was not equal in size to the height of his body. It was not even fitted together with planks, but had openings like a lattice, and was similar to windows that have rather broad openings for the light; because of this he was neither safe from the assault of the rains nor free from the flames of the sun, but endured both of them like the other open-air ascetics, whom he surpassed only in the labor of reclusion.⁴

Syriac ascetic literature, however, is not solely confined to the exploits of men. In fact, there are numerous examples of holy women "whose pursuit of the perfect life took them

³ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, Cistercian Studies Series 88, trans. R.M. Price (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1985), "Marcianus" 3.19, p.45; see also "Theodosius" 10.2, p.89 for a story of a monk who bore heavy chains and tied his own beard around his waist. Compare this with Palladius' account of Philoromus in: Palladius, *The Lausiatic History*, Ancient Christian Writers 34, trans. Robert T. Meyer (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1965), "Philoromus" 45.2, p.122.

⁴ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, "Baradatus" 27.2, p.178. Again, compare this with Palladius' account of Evagrius who spent many nights in an icy well until the heat of his flesh froze: *The Lausiatic History* 38.11, p.113. See also *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: The Apophthegmata Patrum from the anonymous series*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Oxford: S.L.G. Press, 1975), 40; 57.

on singularly symbolic paths of action, most notably found in those notorious practices of the Syrian ascetic movement.”⁵

She [Pelagia] was inside, and I outside, and I failed to recognize her because she had lost those good looks I used to know; her astounding beauty had all faded away, her laughing and bright face that I had known had become ugly, her pretty eyes had become hollow and cavernous as the result of much fasting and the keeping of vigils. The joints of her holy bones, all fleshless, were visible beneath her skin through emaciation brought on by ascetic practices. Indeed the whole complexion of her body was coarse and dark like sackcloth, as the result of her strenuous penance.⁶

A theme common to the stories of women in Syriac hagiography is that of repentance; of a prostitute or harlot turning away from a life of degradation to one of a heroic sanctity that equals their male contemporaries.⁷

While hagiography is rarely biography, one cannot help but to take pause at the extremes these monks endured in their attempts to fulfill their call to live a life in imitation of Christ.⁸ These are the aspects of religious life and expression which make modern readers uneasy. However, these examples of ascetic athleticism pale in comparison to Simeon’s novel approach to purity and the renunciation of the earthly life. Theodoret of Cyrrhus, who claims to be a first-hand witness to Simeon’s balancing on the pillar, relates in his *Life of Saint Simeon Stylites*: “It is said that, as a result of the standing, his left foot has developed a malignant ulcer from which a great deal of pus

⁵ Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 11.

⁶ Ibid., “Pelagia of Antioch”, p. 60.

⁷ Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*, Cistercian Studies Series 106 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications 1987), 7. For a similar account of conversion see “Mary, the Niece of Abraham of Qidum” in Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 27-39, also published in Ward, *Harlots of the Desert*, 85-101.

⁸ For a study on the biography and hagiography in antiquity see Patricia Cox Miller, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Benedicta Ward’s warning is also poignant here: “unless the central purpose of hagiography is taken seriously and understood and explored it is valueless to mine such texts for peripheral details which were important neither to saint, writer, or hearer.” See *Signs and Wonders: Saints, Miracles and Prayers from the 4th Century to the 14th* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publication Co., 1992), xiv. In other words, the central purpose in this literature, in all its symbolism, is to show the working of Christ in human lives. These stories, then, relate the intersection of the human and the divine, a theme that dominated, as we shall see, much of Ephrem’s own writings.

continually oozes.”⁹ Similarly, in his *Vita* of this pillar-saint, Antonius tells how the continuous years of Simeon standing in motionless prayer took a toll on his body:

His thigh grew putrid and accordingly he stood on one foot for two years. Such a huge number of worms fell from his thigh to the earth that those near him had no other job but to collect them and take them back from where they had fallen, while the saint kept saying, ‘Eat from what the Lord has given you.’¹⁰

As the Prologue to the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* describes, the virtuous monks of the desert “do not busy themselves with any earthly matter or take account of anything that belongs to this transient world. But while dwelling on earth in this manner they live as true citizens of heaven.”¹¹ The same can be said for these examples from the Syrian Orient, with one important exception. As Peter Brown notes, “the purity of the body was not, as it was for an Athanasius or a Gregory of Nyssa, a poignant, Platonic echo of an ever-distant spiritual reality.”¹² In other words, Syrian spirituality did not perceive a dualistic nature between body and soul. On the contrary, the focus for the Syrian ascetic became the “angelic life,” that is to say the freedom of the body from all its earthly restraints. And this was accomplished through these harsh ascetic practices. In this regard, the monks who remained mindful and watchful for God are understood as being not of this world. The hermits who had reached such an angelic state are described

⁹ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, “The Life of Saint Simeon Stylites,” in *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, trans. Robert Doran, with a forward by Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Cistercian Studies Series 112 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 81. Theodoret also tells how Simeon made a rope out of palm-leaves and tied it around his waist so tight as to create a wound that continuously bled. His fellow ascetics rebuked the cruelty of his actions, and in a typical hagiographical stylistic flourish, forced him to leave their company out of fear that the weaker ascetics would attempt to follow his example. See *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰ Antonius, “The Life and Daily Mode of Living of the Blessed Simeon the Stylite,” in *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, trans. Robert Doran, with a forward by Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Cistercian Studies Series 112 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 94.

¹¹ Norman Russell, trans., *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, with an introduction by Benedicta Ward, Cistercian Studies Series 34 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980), Prologue 6, p. 49-50.

¹² Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Lectures on the History of Religions, New Series 13 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 330.

in these terms. Part of Simeon's stillness, or deadness, to the world was to always remain contemplative on God.

What, if anything, do these fifth-century ascetics and their "enchratic" elements have to do with Ephrem the Syrian?¹³ Generally speaking, this is the impression of the nature of ascetic and monastic behaviour in the Syrian Orient: a stereotype that Sidney Griffith sees comparable to the stereotype of Egyptian asceticism as that of the Antonian hermit or the Pachomian cenobite.¹⁴ Scholars have continuously concluded that Syriac asceticism admitted "more vivid gestures than it did in the Greek world."¹⁵ However, this stereotype or misconception is not exclusive to modern-day scholarship. In fact, ancient historians attempted to connect the native Syrian monastic tradition with the perceived prestige of the Egyptian desert. As a result, from the fifth-century onward, predominately Byzantine histories refashioned the hagiographical profile of Syria's prominent ascetics away from its native tradition to reflect this new Syro-Greco milieu. In other words, the origins of monasticism in Syria began to be understood as part of the "general flowering

¹³ I am using "enchratic" as a term to denote the apparently bizarre and harsh ascetic practices as illustrated above in the examples of Simeon and Marcianus, and not the Christian movement of the second century C.E. For a discussion on Enchraticism in the early Church see Aelred Baker, "Early Syriac Asceticism," *The Downside Review* 88 (October 1970): 396-400.

¹⁴ Sidney Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," *Asceticism*, eds., Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 220. To this he later adds: "The history of monasticism as a style of the ascetical life in Syria needs scholarly attention. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the hitherto prevailing view rests, at least in part, upon mistaken assumptions from two sources about its origins. One is the traditional, monastic hagiography deriving from the Greco-Syrian milieu itself. The other is the modern scholarly mistake about the date and authorship of certain texts crucial to the case as documentary evidence." The evidence Griffith refers to are five Syriac texts, attributed to Ephrem, extolling the virtues of the anchorite life. *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁵ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 330. This is an interesting conclusion given some of the bizarre behaviour that is described in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, such as one monk covered by vermin: Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, rev. ed, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984), "Theodora 9," p.84. See also Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, "Pachon 23.5," pp.82-83 for a description of a monk holding an asp to his genitals in order to quell the desires of the flesh.

of the monastic phenomenon” that viewed Egypt as the ultimate inspiration for the ascetic ideal.¹⁶

I.II – Thesis and Methodology

The purpose of this thesis is to address whether the writings of Saint Ephrem reveal an ascetic ideal. And if so, what does this ideal look like? Does it in any way resemble the Antonian eremitic model of Christian life based upon the renunciation of everything earthly? Are the representations of the ascetic ideal similar to what is found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, in which interestingly enough, Ephrem makes an appearance? In other words, this paper will examine the stylized representations of the ascetic life and ideal in the works of Saint Ephrem.

In this regard, then, I propose that the ascetic ideal of Saint Ephrem is inherently tied to the notion of the *ihîdāyâ*, that is to say a ‘single’ or ‘celibate’ person living a life in full imitation of Christ. This ideal manifests itself in the writings of Ephrem through the traditional ascetic themes of virginity, baptism, celibacy, sexuality, and the body. Thus, not only does his concern for the perfect life in Christ reveal his ascetic ideal, but it also connects Ephrem to a Syrian proto-monastic tradition he shared with Aphrahat and the anonymous author of the *Book of Steps*. With chapter one as an introduction, four chapters will follow. Chapter two will offer a discussion of the historical context of Ephrem, which includes both an examination of Ephrem’s own historical situation and the manner in which later historians in antiquity understood and characterized his ascetic

¹⁶ Sidney Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria,” 221. See also Sebastian Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” *Numen* 20 (1973): 3, where he notes that a number of Syrian sources claimed that monasticism was introduced into Syria and Mesopotamia by a disciple of Pachomius, Mar Awgen (Eugenius). This is simply another example of how Syria forgot about the existence of a native proto-monastic tradition before the systematization of society, and thus import of the Egyptian ascetic/monastic model.

ideal. Chapter three will address the fourth-century literary context of Ephrem as represented by the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat and the *Book of Steps*. This section will provide an introduction to the important concepts of the *ihidāyā* and *bnay* and *bnath Qyāmā*, which are necessary for an understanding of the proto-monastic tradition to which Ephrem belonged. Furthermore, this chapter will suggest that this literary ascetic milieu of Syrian proto-monasticism, shared by Ephrem, Aphrahat, and the *Book of Steps*, proposes a model of Christian life that was not based upon the renunciation of everything earthly. In other words, this ascetic ideal does not resemble the Antonian eremitic model. Finally, this chapter will briefly discuss the aspects where Ephrem appears to have completely adopted the literary ascetic milieu in which he operated, that is to say those ideals he shared with Aphrahat and *the Book of Steps*. The fourth chapter will discuss the ascetic ideal of Ephrem as it manifests itself in his writings, focusing on such themes as the importance of church and community, baptism, and marriage and virginity. The end of this chapter will offer a discussion on certain passages in the writings of Ephrem which seem to reveal his own understanding of his ascetic ideal. The fifth and final chapter will conclude the thesis and offer a summary of key points.

There will be a number of methodological limitations to this thesis. For instance, this thesis is not concerned with forming a social history of the institution or organization of early Christian monasticism in the Syrian Orient. Any discussion included on the nature of the Syrian proto-monastic tradition is simply contextual. The same can be said of the examination of the later Syrian ascetic tradition, to which Ephrem was characterized as belonging. Furthermore, this thesis is not interested in comparing the usage or understanding of *ihidāyā* or *bnay* and *bnath Qyāmā* by Ephrem, Aphrahat, or in

the *Book of Steps*. This would require an advanced knowledge of the Syriac language and subsequently would focus the thesis toward an etymology of these key terms.

Rather, this thesis is concerned with offering a literary examination of particular themes, symbols, images, and metaphors that are of interest to Ephrem's ascetical vision. In other words, this thesis will examine the ascetic imagery and implications behind such terms.

Methodologically, I will not examine the historicity of the accounts of Ephrem's life, or the particular Jewish, Mesopotamian, or Sumerian traditions to which his theology is in debt. Nor will this study attempt to evaluate the authenticity of Ephrem's works or the character of the translations. I have left this to those scholars and the particular historiography concerned with this issue. This is not to say that these ancient traditions are not important for understanding the development of Ephrem's thought, it is simply that this thesis is not interested in establishing a development but rather how he applies this tradition.

Furthermore, when there are questions concerning the authenticity of sources, I have, for the most part, avoided their use in my discussion of Ephrem's ascetic ideal. In terms of this debate surrounding the authenticity of sources that have been attributed to Ephrem, these include not only hymns, but also five Syriac texts extolling the virtues of the anchorite life. As a result, this thesis has followed Sebastian Brock's listing of the generally accepted, that is to say genuine or authentic, works of Ephrem. Not possessing the necessary linguistic tools to make a judgment on the authenticity of writings attributed to Ephrem, I do not include texts identified as being of questionable

authenticity by scholars in this thesis, even though they may speak specifically to Ephrem's ascetic ideal.¹⁷

Finally, the intention of this thesis is to allow Ephrem to speak for himself. In this regard, any discussion on his contemporaries or his historical/literary context, albeit necessary, is ultimately peripheral to what Ephrem has to say on asceticism. Scholars recognize their dependency upon Aphrahat, not Ephrem, for the majority of their knowledge of fourth-century Syrian monastic institutions and ascetic tradition. His *Demonstration VI* basically forms a monastic rule emphasizing familiar ascetical qualities such as fasting, prayer, and humility. However, as Sebastian Brock notes, there is only one clear example in the entire corpus of Ephrem of knowledge of Aphrahat.¹⁸ Yet, scholars continue to take Aphrahat's discussions on the *ihîdāyā* and the *bnay Qyāmā* and apply it to Ephrem when these terms appear in his writings. This is not to say that both Aphrahat and Ephrem operated in a historical vacuum, or that there are no points of congruency in their respective writings. The misleading implication, simply, is that because they were contemporaries and concerned in some form or another with ascetic practice and the institution of monasticism, i.e. the *bnay Qyāmā*, they shared an ascetic ideal.

¹⁷ Sidney Griffith, in "Asceticism in the Church of Syria," 221, identifies five Syriac texts, that speak specifically on the pursuit of the anchoritic ideal, that have been wrongly attributed to Ephrem. These are as follows: "Letter to the Mountaineers;" "On the Solitary Life of the Anchorites;" two works titled "On Anchorites, Hermits and Mourners;" and "On Solitaries." Sebastian Brock offers a list of the generally accepted genuine works of Ephrem. See Sebastian Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*. Moran Etho 9 (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1997), 23-28. Brock also notes that the collection of hymns on the ascetics Abraham of Qidun, Julian Saba, and the Confessors are wrongly attributed to Ephrem. He identifies the hymns 1-5 on Abraham of Qidun and hymns 1-4 on Julian Saba as being possibly genuine. However, given that there is still question over the authenticity of these texts, I have decided to omit these texts from the present discussion.

¹⁸ Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 24. Brock argues that Ephrem's *Commentary on the Diatessaron* XVI.25 reflects Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* 23:9.

II. The Historical Contexts of Ephrem: or The Lives of the 'Harp of the Spirit'

The purpose of this chapter is to offer an outline of the two historical contexts of Ephrem the Syrian, that is to say Ephrem's own historical situation and the literary tradition that later reshaped the *vita* of this saint.

II.1 – The Life of Saint Ephrem

Although there is no shortage of sources attesting to Ephrem's life, most of these accounts were written years after his death by Greek hagiographers who imagined him in their own way. Most famous of these is the sixth-century *Testament of Ephrem*, a work purporting to be the last words of the saint. It is interesting to note that Ephrem, in his *Nisibene Hymns*, praised the bishops under whom he served for not leaving a last testament:

Without a testament they departed, those three illustrious priests; who in Testaments used to meditate, those two Testaments of God. Great gain have they bequeathed to us, even this example of poverty. They who possessed nothing the blessed ones, made us their possessions; the Church was their treasure.¹⁹

Thus, given this admiration and the fact that Ephrem dedicated his life to the churches of Nisibis and Edessa, it is quite unlikely he would break from this example and leave such a record.

In this regard, then, most of these accounts are “full of legendary additions,” and in fact, as we shall see, separate Ephrem from his own native Syrian milieu.²⁰ Further

¹⁹ Ephrem, “Nisibene Hymns 19.15,” in *Selections Translated into English from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian*, trans. John Gwynn, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, series 2, vol. 13, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1898; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), p.190 (page citations are to the reprint edition). See also idem, “Nisibene Hymns,” 14:25-26, p.183 in which Ephrem refers to himself as the disciple of these bishops.

²⁰ Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, rev. ed. Cistercian Studies Series 124 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 16. See also idem, “Saint Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 2:1 (January 1999), [e-journal] <<http://syrocom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Brock.html>> (accessed 12 February 2004),

compounding this problem is the fact that Ephrem's own writings reveal few biographical details. As a result, then, there is very little that can be said with any great certainty as to the life of this saint.

Ephrem was born in Nisibis (modern-day Nusaybin), on the furthestmost eastern edge of the Roman Empire in the early part of the fourth-century C.E., usually noted by scholars as 306/7 C.E. In a rare autobiographical comment Ephrem reveals his Christian upbringing, noting his debt to the orthodox faith of his parents:

Your truth [was] in my youth; Your verity [is] in my old age.
I rejected and expelled the party of the crucifiers;
I scorned graven images and metal of strange [gods]
and the new fraud that would be contrived to deceive us.
The old and new [frauds] I deny, my Lord;
by the Old and New [Testaments] that I have believed
I have taken the measure of measure of my hymns.²¹

for a very helpful chronological chart that lists the external attestations to Ephrem from the earliest known reference by Epiphanius c.377CE to c.650CE and Ps. Gregory of Nyssa's *Encomium on Ephrem*.

²¹ Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey, The Classics of Western Spirituality 66 (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), Hymn 37:10, p.427. The following two hymns, as translated and quoted in McVey's introduction to this collection, also reveal some biographical details. See *Ibid.*, 9-10. Both hymns are from Ephrem's collection of *Hymns against Heresies*:

By our Lord stand both:
[the time]when I was to enter into the creation
and when it would be good to leave it.
In the way of truth I was born
Even though I as a child did not yet perceive it.
Examining, I acquired it for myself, as I perceived it.
My faith despised the confusing paths that came toward me. (26.10)

I was taught and believed in You
Who are the only One.
Through Your being I heard and held You as true,
You Who are Father through your Only-begotten.
I was three times baptized,
also in the name of the Holy Spirit.
I learned that it is all true,
that Your treasure remains impossible to investigate
although your wealth is widespread. (3.13)

Compare these two hymns to the later sixth-century *Syriac Vita* which claims that Ephrem was the child of pagan parents. This vita can be found in Thomas Josephus Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri: Hymni et Sermones* II (Malines, 1886): 3-90.

For most of his life, then, Ephrem remained in Nisibis defending the faith of his parents from the heretical philosophies of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan. Here he served as a deacon or “interpreter” to four bishops, most notably Jacob of Nisibis who attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E.²²

Although Nisibis had been firmly part of the Roman Empire since the treaty between Diocletian and Narses of Persia in 298 C.E., this important commercial and political center in northeastern Mesopotamia had experienced a number of attempted sieges between 337-50 by the Persian Sassanid king, Shapur II. In each instance Nisibis was able to fend off the attack.²³ In one of his *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem gives a voice to the city under its third siege:

Lo! all the billows trouble me; and Thou hast given more favour to the ark: for waves alone encompassed it, mounds and weapons and waves encircle me. It was unto Thee a storehouse of treasures, but I have been a storehouse of debts: it in Thy love subdued the waves; I in Thy wrath am left desolate among the weapons; the flood bore it, the river threatens me. O Helmsman of the ark, be my pilot on the dry land! To it Thou gavest rest in the haven of a mountain; to me give Thou rest also in the haven of my walls!²⁴

This celebration, however, would be short-lived, for Shapur reorganized his armies and once again focused them on Mesopotamia. Finally in 363 C.E., as a result of Julian’s sudden death, Nisibis was ceded to Shapur as part of a peace treaty between the Persian

²² Kathleen McVey explains that Ephrem’s role of “interpreter” (*mpashqana*) is apparently one of Scripture, although the precise meaning is unclear to scholars. See “Ephrem,” in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the PostClassical World*. Edited by G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999: 427. Ephrem in his *Hymns against Heresies* refers to himself as a “herdsman” (*allana*). Also, for Ephrem’s accounts of the bishops of Nisibis, Jacob (303-338 C.E.), Babu (338-346 C.E.), Vologeses (346-361 C.E.), and Abraham (361-363 C.E.), see Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 13-21, pp.180-93.

²³ See Theodoret of Cyrrhus, “Ecclesiastical History,” in *The Ecclesiastical History, Dialogues, and Letters of Theodoret*, trans. Blomfield Jackson, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, series 2, vol. 3, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1892; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), Book 2.26, p.92 for a stylized account of this siege, including an account of Ephrem climbing a tower and praying for “mosquitoes and gnats” to attack the enemy. On this prayer, clouds of insects descended upon the Persians, throwing them into confusion, and forcing them to retreat.

²⁴ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 1.3, p. 167.

and Roman empires.²⁵ Upon leaving the city, Ephrem, now around fifty years old, passes the corpse of Julian, and heads westward towards Edessa.²⁶ Much of the *Nisibene Hymns* and the *Hymns Against Julian* are occupied with these two major events in Ephrem's life: the loss of Nisibis to the Persians; and the death of the pagan emperor Julian.

Ephrem would spend the last ten years of his life in exile in Edessa, acting as a deacon to its bishops and engaging in a defense against the heterodox philosophy of Arius. He died on 9 June 373 C.E. while ministering and caring for victims of a plague outbreak.²⁷ Thus, from what we know of Ephrem, nothing would suggest the image of an anchorite monk, sitting alone in a cell writing hymns. In fact, there is nothing in the authentic writings of Ephrem that would suggest that he lived a monastic life either as an anchorite or a cenobite.²⁸ This image, however, is the one that was passed down by ancient historians, and even taken up by modern ones. It is now appropriate to turn to how history has imagined Ephrem and his ascetic ideal.

II.II – The Lives of Saint Ephrem: a brief historiography of the “Harp of the Spirit”

Less than fifty years after the death of Ephrem (373C.E.) the Greek hagiographical tradition began to describe this saint in its own terms and according to its own interests.²⁹

²⁵ Ephrem understood the pagan Emperor's death as a suicide to hide his shame. See Ephrem, "Hymns against Julian," in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey, The Classics of Western Spirituality 66 (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), Hymn 3.16, p.248. Ephrem also understands the reason behind the loss of Nisibis as God's punishment for the apostasy of Julian. See *Ibid.*, Hymns 2.16; 4.6, pp.239; 251-52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Hymn 3.1, p.244.

²⁷ McVey, "Introduction," *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 28. McVey notes that the *Chronicle of Edessa* is the source for the date of Ephrem's death.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁹ Edward G. Mathews, "The Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian, the Deacon of Edessa," *Diakonia* 22:1 (1988-1989): 15.

One of the earliest biographical attestations to the life of Saint Ephrem appears in

Jerome's *On Illustrious Men* (392 C.E.):³⁰

Ephrem, Deacon of the church of Edessa, composed many works in Syriac and came to enjoy such prestige that his works are read publicly after the Scripture readings in some churches. I read in Greek his work, *On the Holy Spirit*, which he had translated from the Syriac, and even in translation I could recognize the acuteness of his sublime genius. He died in the reign of the emperor Valens.³¹

While it is obvious from this passage that Jerome knows little about Ephrem – for instance he only mentions Edessa and not Nisibis, where he lived most of his life; and he claims that Ephrem knew Greek, which there is no evidence to support – he does reveal that only twenty years after his death Ephrem's works were known, to some extent, to the Greek world.³² Sozomen, in his *Ecclesiastical History* (443 C.E.), attests to this widespread fame:

His style of writing was so replete with splendid oratory and with richness and temperateness of thought that he surpassed the most approved writers of Greece... The productions of Ephraim have not this disadvantage. They were translated into Greek during his life, and translations are even now being made, and yet they preserve much of their original force, so that his works are not less admired when read in Greek than when read in Syriac.³³

³⁰ David Taylor, "St. Ephrem's Influence On the Greeks," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 1:2 (July 1998), [e-journal] <<http://syrcm.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No2/HV1N2Taylor.html>> (accessed 12 February 2004).

³¹ Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, trans. Thomas P. Halton, *The Fathers of the Church* 100 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 149.

³² Griffith notes that Ephrem knew no Greek and that his thought shows little debt to Greek philosophy. In fact, he argues that Ephrem displays a hellenophobia. See Sidney Griffith "Ephraem, the Deacon of Edessa," in *Diakonia: Studies in Honor of Robert T. Meyer*, ed. T. Halton. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1986: 27. For those passages in Ephrem that are apparently see *Hymns on Faith* 87, specifically verse 4.

³³ Sozomen, "Ecclesiastical History," in *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen, Comprising a History of the Church, From A.D. 323 to A.D. 425*, trans. Chester D. Hartranft, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series 2, vol. 2, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1890; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), Book 3.16, p.295. It is difficult to know if the works in which Socrates is referring to were those authentic to Ephrem, that is to say written by him in Syriac and later translated into Greek, or those written in Greek under Ephrem's name. This second literary tradition is termed "Ephraim Graecus." See Sydney Griffith, "A Spiritual Father for the Whole Church: the Universal Appeal of St. Ephraim the Syrian," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 1:2 (July 1998), [e-journal] <http://syrcm.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No2/HV1N2Griffith.html> (accessed 12 February 2004); Taylor, "St. Ephraim's Influence On the Greeks," <http://syrcm.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No2/HV1N2Taylor.htm>.

As time went on, later monastic circles and traditions came to understand Ephrem as a monk in the mould of Anthony the Great. For the most part, this is due to the *Lausiac History* (419/420 C.E.) and Palladius' characterization of Ephrem as an anchorite. In fact, the Syriac version or translation of the *Lausiac History*, the *Paradise of the Fathers*, is attributed with the reshaping of the Syrian monastic tradition to better reflect a Greek milieu and inheritance.³⁴

Palladius opens his history in a manner similar to that of Jerome or Socrates, with an acknowledgment that Ephrem's reputation had diffused beyond the borders of Syria: "Surely you have heard about Ephraem, the deacon of the church at Edessa."³⁵ While the *Lausiac History* also discusses the literary merits of the Syrian's hymns, it takes great effort to portray Ephrem anachronistically as solitary monk living in Edessa's mountainside: "He always practiced the quiet life and edified those whom he met for many years, but finally left his cell for the following reason." The reason would be to organize famine relief for the city of Edessa, an act of total charity and selflessness that one would expect from a man worthy of the "gift of natural knowledge," the "knowledge of God," and "blessedness."³⁶ After the famine, Ephrem "went back to his cell and died within the month. God had given him this chance for a crown at the very end."³⁷ Thus,

³⁴ Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism," 3; idem, "Saint Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition," <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Brock.html>. This translation of Palladius also incorporated two Sayings from the alphabetical collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* which describe Ephrem as being chosen by God. See Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 59.

³⁵ Palladius, *The Lausiac History* 40, p. 116.

³⁶ Sebastian Brock has noted that this is Palladius' attempt to link Ephrem with the Evagrian stages of the spiritual life. See Brock, "Saint Ephrem in the Eyes of the Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition," <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Brock.html>. Edward Mathews offers an interesting comparison between Palladius' notices on Ephrem and Evagrius: the expression that Ephrem attained the "gift of natural knowledge" is only repeated in his description of Evagrius' life (*Lausiac History* 38.10). Mathews then asks that given Palladius' Evagrian influence, "does Palladius consider Ephrem the most Evagrian of all the persons whose lives he describes? Or does he simply know so little of Ephrem that his only recourse is to the master's vocabulary?" See "The *Vita* Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian," 20.

³⁷ Palladius, *The Lausiac History* 40, p. 117.

similar to Jerome's earlier account, Palladius shows little knowledge or acquaintance with Ephrem or his writings. The Syrian is only mentioned as living and working out of the church at Edessa, and most notable is his conclusion that "[Ephrem] left some writings, too, most of which are worthy of attention."³⁸ Not only is Ephrem's authentic corpus extensive, but Sozomen even notes that his writings numbered "some three hundred thousand verses."³⁹ Finally, as Edward Mathews makes evident, Palladius opens his notice on Ephrem by describing him as a deacon and then attributes to him a solitary lifestyle: "it is strikingly odd that a deacon would spend all his time enclosed in a cell living the 'quiet life', and never depart from his cell except at the end of his life."⁴⁰ One would think that the duties and responsibilities of a deacon to the parishioners of a church community would not be compatible with the life of a solitary monk.

This characterization of Ephrem as a fifth-century "Greek" monk continues in Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History*. Sozomen repeats Palladius' account of the famine, noting that "the city of Edessa being severely visited by famine, he quitted the solitary cell in which he pursued philosophy and rebuked the rich for permitting the poor to die around them."⁴¹ Again, after the famine is over Ephrem returned to his cell where he soon died. However, Sozomen also includes a number hagiographical innovations which further distort the image of Ephrem and his ascetic ideal.⁴² For instance, Sozomen connects Ephrem with Basil, the Bishop of Caesarea (d. 379 C.E.), by having the Syrian winning the admiration of the great Cappadocian who was "astonished at his erudition."⁴³

³⁸ Palladius, *The Lausiac History* 40, p. 117.

³⁹ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.16, p. 295.

⁴⁰ Mathews, "The *Vita* Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian," 20.

⁴¹ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.16, p. 296.

⁴² Sozomen is the first to connect Ephrem with the Cappadocians, specifically Basil the Great.

⁴³ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.16, p. 295.

Sozomen even offers an explanation of the importance of this connection: “The opinion of Basil, who is universally confessed to have been the most eloquent man of his age, is a stronger testimony, I think, to the merit of Ephraim, than anything that could be indebted to his praise.”⁴⁴ Thus, not only does Sozomen equate Ephrem’s eloquence and erudition to that of Basil’s, but he also connects the Syrian’s defense of the orthodox faith to Basil’s fight against fourth-century heresies. Basil was famous for his defense of the divinity of the Three Persons of the Trinity, which Ephrem also defended, as we have already noted, during his last years in Edessa.

Sozomen also tells that Ephrem is said to have “refrained from the sight of women” and even rebuked one who met him face-to-face.⁴⁵ Again, this does not fit the picture of a deacon engaged in the life of his local church community. Sozomen’s intentions, however, are evidently clear. Women, in desert literature, were often characterized as a threat to the purity of a monk’s heart. The *Lausiac History* records that both Macarius and Pachon were tempted by dreams of women that were a result of inner fantasies.⁴⁶ Similarly, one hermit suffered temptation “through remembering his own wife.”⁴⁷ Anthony, the archetype of the desert monk, reveals that these visions and dreams of women were one of the many faces of the devil: “[the demons] use fears to terrify, transforming themselves into women one moment, wild animals the next moment

⁴⁴ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.16, p. 295.

⁴⁵ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.16, p. 296.

⁴⁶ Palladius, *The Lausiac History* 18.18; 23.3, pp.63; 82. See also Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, “Paphnutius 5,” p.203. Jerome, in his famous letter to Eustochium, tells how he was tormented in the desert by the pleasures of Rome, and the memories of dancing girls. See Jerome, “Letters,” in *The Ecclesiastical History, Dialogues, and Letters of Theodoret*, trans. Blomfield Jackson, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, series 2, vol. 3, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1892; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), Letter 22.7, p. 25.

⁴⁷ *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, 42.

and then serpents...⁴⁸ One can see, then, that all attempts are being made to connect Ephrem with this later ascetic tradition. The ascetic identity for which all desert fathers strove was that of being recognized and worthy of God's bestowment of purity of heart. The manner, as we have seen, adopted by the hermits to achieve and defend this ascetic identity worked to repress the sinful desires of the flesh.⁴⁹ Thus, by characterizing Ephrem as enduring similar temptations and ascetic practices, historians such as Palladius and Sozomen create an anachronistic image of the Syrian and his own ascetic ideal.

It is interesting to note that Theodoret, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, does not associate the anchoritic lifestyle with Ephrem. Out of all of these historians, Theodoret would have been the most acquainted with monasticism in Syria.⁵⁰ Furthermore, he does not include the Syrian in *A History of the Monks of Syria*. Instead, his letter to the monks of Constantinople offers the best picture of how Theodoret understood Ephrem; as a teacher and as the "harp of the Spirit, who daily waters the people of Syria with the streams of grace."⁵¹ Whether or not he understood the asceticism of Ephrem in the same way as his contemporaries Palladius and Sozomen is not entirely clear. Apparently then, Theodoret understands Ephrem's widespread fame differently and thereby relates a more appropriate image that corresponds to the duties of a deacon. However, it was the image first proposed by Palladius and furthered by Sozomen that would come to be the popular understanding of Ephrem and his asceticism.

⁴⁸ Athanasius, "Life of Antony," trans. Carolinne White, *Early Christian Lives* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 24; see also *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, 56; Palladius, *The Lausiac History* 23.3-4, p. 82.

⁴⁹ Aline Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant, Family, Sexuality, and Social Relations in Past Times (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 151.

⁵⁰ Mathews, "The *Vita* Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian," 26.

⁵¹ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, "Letters," in *The Ecclesiastical History, Dialogues, and Letters of Theodoret*, trans. Blomfield Jackson, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, series 2, vol. 3, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1892; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), Letter 145, p. 315.

Thus, from these two fifth-century “patristic giants” the image of Ephrem which emerges is that of a hermit in a cell.⁵² However, nothing comes closer to this Byzantine image than the anonymous sixth-century *Syriac Vita*, which offers the only physical description of Ephrem.⁵³ Instead of offering a picture of Ephrem as a deacon working within a church community, the author of the *Vita* characterizes him as an emaciated ascetic living alone in a cell:

On the other hand Holy Ephrem, from the time he began the monastic life until the end of his life, consumed no bread except barley and occasionally dry beans and greens. His drink was water. His flesh was dried upon his bones like a potter’s pot. His clothes assembled from worn out rags were stiff with dirt. Small in stature, his expression was always sad, and he never indulged in laughter.⁵⁴

This image is strikingly reminiscent of the images of Simeon and Marcianus described above, or any other ascetic description found in the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* and the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.⁵⁵ Ephrem, here, is presented as an anchorite *par excellence*. Although he is so emaciated from fasting that his skin hangs from his bones, the Syrian’s focus remains on God and His heavenly reward. Earlier in the *vita*, Ephrem is even presented as the epitome of the Syriac ascetic tradition:

A certain night when that monk had been keeping vigil with psalms and prayers, going out beyond his cell he saw in the middle of the night an angel of God descending from

⁵² Mathews, “The *Vita* Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian,” 16.

⁵³ Mathews, “The *Vita* Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian,” 24. Sebastian Brock notes that there are two published forms of this *Vita*: “one, based on Vatican syr.117, was edited by P. Benedictus and J.E. Assemani, *Sancti Patris Nostri Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia*, III (Rome, 1743), xxii-lxiii... and the second, based on Paris syr.235, in T. Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones*, II (Malines, 1886), 3-89.” See “Saint Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition,” <http://syrcm.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Brock.html>.

⁵⁴ Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri* II, 42-3: Sanctus autem Ephræmus, a quo tempore vitam monachalem incepit usque ad finem vitæ, non comedit nisi panem hordeaceum et interdum legumina arida et olera. Potus ejus aqua erat. Carnes ejus super ossibus desiccatae erant sicut testa figuli. Vestes ejus e pannis detritis confectæ squallebant. Statura parvus, vultu perpetuo moestus, raribarbius nunquam risui indulgebat. ⁵⁵In the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* both Macarius of Alexandria (23.3) and Helle (12.7) are described as being dressed in rags. See also *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 6.9; 12.2; 14.2; *Lausiac History* 59.2. In the *Apophthegmata Patrum* a monk is described as eating only dry bread, green herbs and water. See An Abba of Rome 1. See also *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 2.5; 8.38; *A History of the Monks of Syria* 1.2; 6.1; and 12.1 which speaks of soaked lentils. In the *Life of Saint Anthony*, Athanasius describes water as Anthony’s only drink. See Athanasius, *Life of Anthony*, 13.

heaven and in his hand a large scroll written on both sides. And the angel said to those who were standing with the monk at a distance: "To which one shall I give the scroll that I am keeping for the least?" They replied: "Eugenius the solitary in the Egyptian desert." The angel replied: "I do not accept the order." And again: "Who is worthy of it?" They replied: "Julian the monk." The angel replied: "None among men today are worthy of it except Ephrem the Syrian on the mountain of Edessa."⁵⁶

As Mathews explains, 'Eugenius' refers to Pachomius' student who supposedly brought monasticism to Syria, and 'Julian' is Julian Saba, Syria's most famous anchorite.⁵⁷ Thus, not only is Ephrem deemed pure and worthy enough to possess this heavenly scroll, but, by extension of the angel not giving it to Eugenius or Julian, the Syrian is designated the greatest of all the monks in Syria.

This sixth-century *vita* continues to take literary licence with the life of Ephrem, and even expands Sozomen's connection between the Syrian and Basil into a face-to-face meeting. Not only does this make Ephrem more cosmopolitan and worldly than he probably was, but this innovation also implies that he favoured the anchoritic lifestyle. This becomes especially evident when the *vita* has Ephrem staying in the Egyptian desert for eight years.⁵⁸ Thus from the mountains of Edessa to the most famous of deserts, Ephrem's metamorphosis into a solitary monk, which began with Palladius and Sozomen, appears to be complete. He has reached the apparent birth-place of monasticism, he has re-imagined his flesh by controlling the desires of the body, and he has transcended the human condition by being first among the greatest of the Syrian monks. In all aspects,

⁵⁶ Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri* II, 30: Quadam nocte cum psalmis et orationi ille monachus instaret, extra cellam egressus vidit, media nocte, angelum Dei e cælo descendentem et in manu ejus magnum volumen ex utraque parte scriptum. Dixit autem angelus ad eos qui cum monacho abstabant: "Cuinam dabo volumen quod minibus teneo?" Qui responderunt: "Eugeni deserti Ægyptiaci solitario." Responsuit angelus: "Mandatum non accepi." Et rursus: "Quis illo dignus est?" Responderunt: "Julianus monachus." Responsuit angelus: "Nullus hominum hodie illo dignus est, præter Ephræm Syrum in monte Edessæ." (Thanks to Dr. T.A. Smith, University of St. Michael's College, for his help with this translation.) The *Apophthegmata Patrum* relates the same account of the angel with the scroll minus the wrong answers from the monks. See Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, "Ephrem 2," p. 59.

⁵⁷ Mathews, "The *Vita* Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian," 25. For the life of Julian Saba see Theodoret, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 23-48.

⁵⁸ Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri* II, 44-6.

then, Ephrem is a Syrian version of the archetypal Anthony the Great. This image of Ephrem, then, conforms to a “hagiographical profile much esteemed to fifth and sixth century Syro-Byzantine circles.”⁵⁹

Concerning all of these additions to the portrait or image of Ephrem, Sebastian Brock offers an interesting explanation:

Academics who deal with the past are frequently urged to make their subject relevant to the modern day, and maybe this is how we should view the transformations that have taken place in the Syriac tradition with the portrait of St. Ephrem: perhaps all that the fifth- and sixth-century biographers wanted to do was to present the saint in a modern guise, to make him relevant to their own context. We, with our benefit of hindsight, can see that in the process of ‘updating’ St. Ephrem, they have perverted the truth. But instead of simply condemning them, we should learn a lesson from what they have done, and beware of repeating their error, that is, of not allowing St. Ephrem’s own writings speak for themselves. In other words, in order to gain a true picture of the saint, one needs to go back to the genuine texts themselves.⁶⁰

In this regard, then, it is now appropriate to turn to these genuine works and the manner in which they reveal the ascetic ideal of Ephrem. First, however, it is necessary to briefly situate these texts within their wider literary context. In other words, Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* and the anonymous *Book of Steps* will serve as additional examples of the early manifestations of asceticism in the Syrian Orient. Both of these texts testify to the existence of Syrian proto-monasticism. The purpose of the next chapter, then, is not to give a history of asceticism within early Christianity or an account of its origins and development in Syria, but rather it will assist in fleshing out the particular milieu that existed in the fourth-century ascetically-minded circles in Syria.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria,” 221.

⁶⁰ Brock, “Saint Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition,” <http://syrocom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Brock.html>.

⁶¹ For such an examination on the influences of Manichaeism, Tatian’s Diatessaron, and the Jewish inheritance upon the ascetical thought in the Syriac-speaking world, see Aelred Baker, “Syriac and the Origins of Monasticism,” *The Downside Review* (October 1968): 342-53; Shafiq AbouZayd, *IHIDAYUTHA: A Study of the Life of Singleness in the Syrian Orient. From Ignatius of Antioch to Chalcedon 451 A.D* (Oxford: ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies, 1993): 9-14; Thomas Kathanar Koonammakkal, “Early Christian Monastic Origins: A General Introduction in the Context of the Syrian Orient,” *Dialogue* 18 (1991): 14-48.

III. The Literary Context of Ephrem: Aphrahat and the Book of Steps

As we have already seen, the later *vita* tradition of Ephrem, for the most part, portrays him in a misleading and anachronistic way:

[Ephrem's] true milieu belonged to the indigenous Syrian tradition of the consecrated life, prior to the arrival in Syria and Mesopotamia of the Egyptian tradition which later dominated the scene.⁶²

Thus, while much of western Syria had been exposed to Greek philosophy and culture, the Mesopotamian world east of Antioch, by the time of Ephrem, was far less Hellenized.⁶³ This indigenous nature of the eastern Syrian Orient becomes evident in the ascetic practice of Ephrem. As we have already seen, for Ephrem, there was no great escape into the desert for a life of solitude in a cell. This was the life of a hermit, made famous by Anthony the Great, and not of a deacon in charge of a church community.

In this regard, then, Ephrem, belongs to a period that scholars refer to as 'proto-monasticism,' that is to say, an ascetic tradition independent of that which was developing at the same time in the deserts of Egypt. Furthermore, this fourth-century period "witness[es] the first major Syriac writings to survive."⁶⁴ Thus, Ephrem shares the Syrian proto-monastic literary context with two important works: the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat (d. c.345 C.E) and the anonymous *Book of Steps*. In fact, the primary source for details on this early ascetic tradition comes from Ephrem's contemporary, Aphrahat, and his *Demonstrations*.

⁶² Brock, "Saint Ephrem in the Eyes of the Later Liturgical Tradition." <http://syrcm.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Brock.html>.

⁶³ Andrew Palmer, "Single Human Being Divided in Himself: Ephraim the Syrian, the Man in the Middle," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 1:2 (July 1998), [e-journal] <<http://syrcm.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No2/HV1N2Palmer.html>> (accessed 12 February 2004); Brown, in *The Body and Society*, refers to Antioch as a "Greek Metropolis." See p. 323.

⁶⁴ Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 19.

III.I – Aphrahat the “Persian Sage”

While little is known about the actual life of Aphrahat, the “Persian Sage,” some details concerning his understanding of the ideals of fourth-century Syrian monasticism can be gleaned from the twenty-three “demonstrations” he wrote between 337 and 345 C.E.⁶⁵ Not only do they represent the “first extensive piece of Syriac literature to survive,” and embody an early style of Syriac prose, but these writings offer an insight into an ascetic tradition which flourished independent from the influence of Egyptian monasticism.⁶⁶ In this regard, then, Aphrahat and his *Demonstrations*, especially number six “On the Bnay Qyama,”⁶⁷ are important to any study on Ephrem’s asceticism. Not only do these writings further our understanding of the organization or institution of asceticism in fourth-century Syria, but they also offer details on the consecrated life that fashioned Ephrem’s ascetic ideal.⁶⁸ In fact, many of the same themes present in Aphrahat’s writing will re-emerge in Ephrem and his hymns: in particular, the importance of the role of baptism in the restoration of Adam’s paradisiacal state; the ascetic goal of the angelic life; as well as a preference for virginity over marriage.

⁶⁵ Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*, vol. 1, *The Origin of Asceticism. Early Monasticism in Persia*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 184 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1958), 173; Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” p.9. Sebastian Brock deduces from *Demonstrations* 10 and 14 that Aphrahat was figure of some authority within the Church. See idem, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 19. Theodoret of Cyrillus, includes Aphrahat of Antioch in his *A History of the Monks in Syria* (chapter eight) and characterizes him as a monk who taught that the “nature of all men is one.” This is not the Aphrahat whom we are dealing with here. See AbouZayd, *IHIDAYUTHA*, 343-44.

⁶⁶ Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 22.

⁶⁷ The title of this particular *Demonstration* has been misleadingly translated as “Of Monks,” which of course evokes the image of an ascetic practice not yet present in Syria in the fourth-century C.E.

⁶⁸ Sidney Griffith, “Monks, Singles, and the Sons of the Covenant,” in *EYAOIHMMA: Studies in Honour of Robert Taft, S.J.*, eds. E. Carr, S. Parenti, A.A. Thiermeyer, and E. Velkovska (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1993), 141-42.

The first ten demonstrations are primarily concerned with specific ascetic virtues and practices which Aphrahat believes to be necessary for the Christian life.⁶⁹ These include faith, love, fasting, prayer, humility and virginity.⁷⁰ The underlying goal of all these virtues was to live a life in complete imitation of Christ. In this regard, then, the relationship between the believer and Christ called for a separation from the earthly world:

Let us hate ourselves and love Christ, as He loved us and gave Himself up for our sakes. Let us honour the spirit of Christ, that we may receive grace from Him. Let us be strangers to the world, even as Christ was not of it.⁷¹

Likewise:

Whosoever adopts the likeness of angels, let him be a stranger to men, Whosoever takes upon him the yoke of the saints, let him remove from him getting and spending. Whosoever desires to gain himself, let him remove from him the gain of the world.⁷²

Upon first examination, this appears to be consistent with the asceticism practiced by Anthony and the other Desert Fathers. Interestingly enough, as Carolinne White points out, “the life of withdrawal is regarded as in some sense an imitation of Christ’s withdrawal into the desert after his baptism in order to face the devil’s temptations.”⁷³ However, the concern here is for the renunciation of the luxuries of the secular world, not necessarily a life of isolated withdrawal. As Brock notes, “from Aphrahat we learn that the members of the *qyama* lived in small associations, sometimes of men and women

⁶⁹ Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 21. The first ten demonstrations are as follows: “On Faith,” “On Love,” “On Fasting,” “On Prayer,” “On Wars,” “On the Bnay Qyama,” “On Penitents,” “On the Resurrection of the Dead,” “On Humility,” and “On the Pastors.”

⁷⁰ Aphrahat, “Demonstrations” in *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, trans. Sebastian Brock, Moran Etho 9 (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1997), Demonstration 6.8, p. 149.

⁷¹ Aphrahat, “Demonstrations” in *Select Demonstrations*, trans. John Gwynn, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, series 2, vol. 13, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1898; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), Demonstration 6.1, p. 362. Aphrahat also speaks of being alien to the world in Demonstration 22.7, p. 404: “O ye that trust in the world, let this world be despised in your eyes; for ye are sojourners and aliens in the midst of it, and ye know not the day that ye shall be taken out of it.”

⁷² Aphrahat, *Demonstrations*, 6.1, p. 364. (Gwynn translation)

⁷³ Carolinne White, “Introduction,” *Early Christian Lives* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), xvi.

together (although this was frowned upon by Aphrahat), forming house communities or informal religious communes.”⁷⁴ In this regard, then, the form of imitation extolled by Aphrahat, and as we shall see Ephrem and the author of the *Book of Steps*, did not involve a radical break from society. Rather, they opted for the confines of a community of like-minded believers over that of a lone cell in the desert.

However, before furthering this discussion on the *Demonstrations*, it is necessary to briefly discuss a number of key terms and concepts that emerge in Aphrahat, and subsequently in Ephrem and his hymns. In particular *ihīdāyā* and *bnay* and *bnath Qyāmā* are absolutely central to any understanding of early Syrian spirituality and asceticism.

Central to early Syrian spirituality was the notion of living a life in imitation of Christ. Christ was the *ihīdāyā*, the Only-Begotten, and thereby His (baptized) ascetic disciple was an *ihīdāyā*, that is to say, single, celibate, or single-minded.⁷⁵ Brock succinctly summarizes the many nuances of this term:

The *ihīdāyā* is a follower and imitator of Christ the *ihīdāyā* par excellence; he is single-minded for Christ; his heart is single and not divided; he is single as Adam was single when he was created; he is single in the sense of celibate.⁷⁶

While *ihīdāyā* later took on the meaning of the Greek *monachos*, meaning monk or solitary, its primary meaning in the time of Ephrem and Aphrahat referred to the unity of man with God.⁷⁷ This unity was absolutely necessary to achieve the goal of the ascetic life; the return to the eschatological paradise: “The singleness of God, the singleness of

⁷⁴ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 135-36.

⁷⁵ Koonammakkal, “Ephrem’s Ideas on Singleness,” <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Koonammakkal.html>.

⁷⁶ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 139. Robert Murray has also proposed a threefold meaning to the term *ihīdāyā*: “single from wife or family (μοναχός), single in heart (μονότροπος, μονόζωνος), not διγυρος, united to the Only-Begotten (Μονογενής).” See Robert Murray “The Exhortation to Candidates for Ascetical Vows at Baptism in the Ancient Syriac Church,” *New Testament Studies* 21 (1975), 67.

⁷⁷ AbouZayd, *IHIDAYUTHA*, 269; see also Sebastian Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), 26.

Christ and the singleness of Adam in Paradise were thought of as combined in one ideal goal.”⁷⁸ In other words, the single-minded imitation and undivided commitment to the heavenly *Îhidāyâ* was the ideal of the earthly *îhidāyâ*.⁷⁹

The concern for celibacy and virginity in Syrian asceticism was reflected in the *îhidāye*, which included two groups of people: virgins or celibates who never married; and the holy-ones who have renounced intercourse and remained sexually continent in marriage. Together, these groups constituted the *bnay* and *bnath Qyāmâ*, the sons and daughters of the Covenant.⁸⁰ This ascetic ideal of virginity will be further explained in the following discussion on Aphrahat, and later Ephrem. For now, it is enough to know that these Covenanters, at baptism, put on a special relationship with the *Îhidāyâ*. In fact, baptism involved ‘putting on’ Christ, just as the Incarnation involved Christ ‘putting on’ a body. A number of Ephrem’s *Hymns on the Epiphany* relate this new connection between both types of *îhidāyâ* and the Only-Begotten:

Lo! they are baptized and they become – Virgins and saints, - who have gone down, been baptized, and put on – the One Only begotten...For whoso have become baptized and put on Him – the Only begotten the Lord of the many, - has filled thereby the place of many, - for to him Christ has become a great treasure.⁸¹

Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* also explicitly speak of this special relationship:

“These things beseem solitaires who take up the heavenly yoke, and become disciples of

⁷⁸ Koonammakkal, “Ephrem’s Ideas on Singleness,” <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Koonammakkal.html>; see also Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 31-32.

⁷⁹ Koonammakkal, “Ephrem’s Ideas on Singleness,” <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Koonammakkal.html>.

⁸⁰ For a complete discussion on these Covenanters, their ecclesial status, mode of life, organization, and how the term *qyāmâ* was used by Aphrahat, see George Nudungatt, “The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-Speaking Church,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973): 191-215; 419-444.

⁸¹ Ephrem, “Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany,” in *Selections Translated into English from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian*, trans. John Gwynn, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, series 2, vol. 13, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1898; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), Hymn 8:17-18, p. 278.

Christ. For thus it befits the disciples of Christ to be like unto Christ their Master.”⁸²

Perfect discipleship, then, is achieved only by the restoration of an *ihīdāyā*’s original purity through baptism. Baptism returns or restores the state of virginity, that is to say the paradisiacal, pre-lapsarian, state of Adam and Eve:⁸³ “When the earth was virgin, it was not rendered unclean, but after rain fell on it, it brought forth thorns. Adam in his virginity was beloved and good. After he gave birth to Eve, he erred and transgressed the commandment.”⁸⁴ In other words, baptism, as the new circumcision of the heart, offered the *ihīdāyā* re-entry into Paradise, and the reacquisition of Adam’s and Eve’s original singleness of heart and mind. In this regard, then, the ascetic ideal of virginity did not originate from an understanding of the body as being inherently evil. Rather the body, as we shall see in Ephrem, is considered for the *ihīdāyā* to be the very bridal chamber that Christ enters.

While it is quite evident that for Aphrahat the *ihīdāye* were to be celibate, he did not understand virginity and marriage as standing in contradiction of each other:

Far be it from us that we should attribute anything shameful to marriage which God has placed in the world, for thus it is written, ‘God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (Gen. 1:31)...He created marriage, worldly procreation, and it is very good; but virginity is more excellent than it.’⁸⁵

Rather, virginity, as understood by Aphrahat was superior to worldly marriage. Celibacy, as practiced by either virgins or continent holy-ones in marriage, fostered piety. This is

⁸² Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 6.8, p. 369. (Gwynn translation)

⁸³ Shafiq AbouZayd, “Virginity in Aphrahat,” in *V Symposium Syriacum 1998*. ed. René Lavenant, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 236 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1990), 124.

⁸⁴ Aphrahat, “Demonstrations,” in *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran*, trans. Jacob Neusner, *Studia Post-Biblica* 19 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), Demonstration 18.8, p. 81.

⁸⁵ Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 18.8, p. 81. (Neusner translation)

evident in his exegesis of Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh."⁸⁶

When a man has not yet taken a wife, he loves and honors God, his father, and the holy spirit, his mother, and has no other love. But when a man takes a wife, he abandons his father and his mother, [namely] those things that are mentioned above, and his mind is captivated by this world. His mind, heart, and thought are turned aside from God into the world.⁸⁷

A man's love for his wife, then, creates in him a divided mind and heart, for he loves separately and differently his wife and God. Thus, in order to adopt the likeness of angels, the *ihîdāye* would have to mimic their marriageless life. In fact, the *ihîdāye* were to renounce worldly marriage, for they were betrothed to Christ at baptism and were to enter into the true marriage with Him.⁸⁸ This becomes evident in Aphrahat's warning to these consecrated ascetics whom he believes are living inappropriately:

Therefore, my brethren, if any man who is a monk or a saint, who loves the solitary life, yet desires that a woman, bound by monastic vow like himself, should dwell with him, it would be better for him in that case to take (to wife) a woman openly and not be made wanton by lust. So also again the woman, if she be not separated from the solitary, it is better for her to marry openly. Woman then ought to dwell with woman, and man to dwell with man. And also whatever man desires to continue in holiness, let not his spouse dwell with him, lest he turn back to his former condition, and so be esteemed an adulterer. Therefore this counsel is becoming and right and good, that I give to myself and you, my beloved solitaires, who do not take wives, and to virgins who do not marry, and to those who have loved holiness.⁸⁹

Aphrahat's emphasis, here, on celibacy and singleness actually works to reiterate his earlier call for the renunciation of the earthly life. In fact, the life of virginity or continence for those living the consecrated life allows them to assume the angelic life. In other words, the ascetics become strangers to the world; take on the likeness of angels, and commune with them as a result of their virtue.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Genesis 2:24, NRSV.

⁸⁷ Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 18.10, p. 82. (Neusner translation)

⁸⁸ Arthur Vööbus, "The Institution of the *Benai Qeïama* and *Benat Qeïama* in the Ancient Syrian Church," *Church History* (1961): 21.

⁸⁹ Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 6.4, p. 366. (Gwynn translation)

⁹⁰ Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria," 231.

For those that take not wives shall be ministered to by the Watchers of heaven. Those that preserve chastity shall rest in the sanctuary of the Most High. The Only Begotten Who is from the bosom of His Father shall cause all the solitaires to rejoice. There is there neither male nor female, neither bond nor free, but they all are the children of the Most High.⁹¹

We will return to this examination of virginity, marriage, and the heavenly Bridegroom in our following discussion on Ephrem. For now, it is enough to understand how this brief discussion on Aphrahat and his asceticism reveals certain details on the character of Syrian proto-monasticism and the ideals behind the terms *ihîdāyâ* and *bnay* and *bnath Qyāmâ*. Although Aphrahat does not offer an exact description of the ascetic practice and nature of the *bnay* and *bnath Qyāmâ*, it can be understood that the proto-monastic tradition involved a consecrated life of virginity and celibacy, regardless of marital status. The ultimate goal was to live a life in complete imitation of Christ, and baptism provided the opportunity to take up the likeness of angels and the restoration of Paradise. All of this, of course, was only a preview and done in anticipation of the reward of eternal life in heaven.

Ephrem shared in the milieu of this literary tradition and in its expression of a desire to be in complete imitation of Christ. This is alluded to in his twentieth *Hymn on Faith* in which he speaks as an *ihîdāyâ* in search for unity with the *ihîdāyâ*:

Let prayer within wipe clean the murky thoughts,
let faith wipe clean the sense outwardly,
and let one such man who is divided
collect himself together and become one before You.⁹²

As we have seen, Aphrahat espoused a number of ascetic ideals to achieve this goal: these concerned baptism, virginity, marriage, and the angelic life. In fact, these themes

⁹¹ Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 6.6, p. 367. (Gwynn translation)

⁹² Ephrem, "Hymns on Faith," in *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, trans. Sebastian Brock, Cistercian Studies Series 101 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), Hymn 20.17, p.35.

dominate much of Ephrem's own ascetic ideal. In this regard, then, the precise manner in which Ephrem fits into this literary context or milieu will become clearer in the following chapter. For now, it is enough to note that Ephrem shared with Aphrahat in extolling the importance of these said ideals. For instance, Ephrem also understood baptism as a transformative moment in the life of an *ihîdāyâ*: the moment, as already cited above in the *Hymns on the Epiphany*, when one "puts on" a special relationship with Christ. As noted in the above section, this is quite reminiscent of Aphrahat's understanding of baptism as restoring the original purity of Adam in his virginal and paradisiacal state. These two ascetics even share a preference for virginity over marriage, and in fact equate chastity with living an angelic life. Finally, both Aphrahat and Ephrem comment on perceived abuses which had become prevalent within the institution of the *bnay* and *bnath Qyāmā*: Aphrahat against male and female cohabitation; and Ephrem, as we shall see, against virgins who are virtuous only in the flesh and not the heart as well.⁹³ Such comments on a declining moral standard reveal a shared intimacy that both Aphrahat and Ephrem had with their communities and the proto-monastic tradition.⁹⁴ It follows, then, that this shared milieu would be reflected in their writings. Again, these connections between Aphrahat and Ephrem will become clearer in the following chapter. It is best now to turn to the *Book of Steps* to see how it shared with Aphrahat in this Syrian proto-monastic tradition.

⁹³ Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 6.4, p. 366. (Gwynn translation); Ephrem, "Letter to Publius," in *St. Ephrem the Syrian. Selected Prose Works*, trans. Matthews, E.G. and J.P. Amar. Fathers of the Church 91, ed. Kathleen McVey (Washington: Catholic University Press of America, 1994), 350.

⁹⁴ Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria," 236.

III.II – The *Liber Graduum*: The Syriac Book of Steps

The *Book of Steps* is an anonymously written mid-to-late fourth century collection of thirty homilies that deal with many of the same themes found in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*. In this regard, then, it is an important witness to the native Syriac monastic tradition. Although the author of this ascetic treatise, most likely a "spiritual leader of a pre-monastic Christian community," is aware of the *bnay* and *bnath Qyāmā*, they play a relatively marginal role in his text.⁹⁵ However, this does not mean that this text does not concern itself with the ascetic ideal of living a life in complete imitation of Christ. Rather, what can be taken from this text concerning the Syrian proto-monastic tradition is to be found in the author's discussion of the two groups that formed his ascetic community: the Upright and the Perfect.

The Upright were those Christians who accepted a life of active charity, such as assisting the poor and the sick.⁹⁶ In other words, they committed their lives to the fulfillment of the minor commandments of Scripture. The mission or proper conduct of the Upright is outlined throughout the *Book of Steps*:

And those who in the world have time for leisure and business and sell and buy and own possessions justly and benefit the needy are the Upright, inferior to the Perfect. For human Uprightness does not treat poorly anyone who treats it poorly, but it flees evil, when its own goods have been destroyed, as Isaac left behind his father's wells when there was a dispute with him...⁹⁷

It is interesting to note that this distinction between the duties of the Upright and those of the Perfect is also present, although expressed somewhat differently, in the Egyptian

⁹⁵ Robert A. Kitchen, "Becoming Perfect: The Maturing of Asceticism in the *Liber Graduum*," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 2 (2002): 31.

⁹⁶ Kitchen, "Becoming Perfect," 31.

⁹⁷ *Book of Steps* 15.9, ed. M. Kmosko. *Patrologia Syrica* 3 (Paris, 1926), p. 353: "Et qui in saeculo otio et negotio vacant et vendunt et emunt et iuste possident et egenis benefaciunt: iusti sunt, perfectis posteriores. Iustitia enim humana malefacienti sibi non malefacit, sed suis perditis fugit malum, sicut Isaac reliquit puteos aquae patris sui, cum secum litigaretur..." Kitchen quotes homily 30 and offers a description of the Upright's responsibility regarding their wealth, see "Becoming Perfect," 41. Translation is Dr. T.A. Smith's, University of St. Michael's College. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

ascetic tradition. John of Lycopolis, in a dialogue with his disciples, discusses two levels of ascetic achievement: “for an ascetic is good if he is constantly training himself in the world, if he shows brotherly love and practices hospitality and charity, if he gives alms and is generous to visitors, if he helps the sick and does not give offence to anyone.”⁹⁸ In this first stage, the ascetic, despite having achieved a degree of separation from the world, is nevertheless still acting in the world. Through his charitable acts and humble character the monk achieves a certain purity of heart. Abba John then moves to a description of the second level of ascetic achievement, praising “the contemplative” hermit. This ascetic divorced himself entirely from the world, and therefore has risen to a new “spiritual sphere” and left to others these earthly active works:

Better and greater than he is the contemplative, who has risen from active works to the spiritual sphere and has left it to the others to be anxious about earthly things. Since he has not only denied himself but even become forgetful of himself, he is concerned with the things of heaven. He stands unimpeded in the presence of God, without any anxiety holding him back. For such a man spends his life with God; he is occupied with God, and praises him with ceaseless hymnody.⁹⁹

In both cases, John stresses the absolute necessity of cultivating stillness in contemplation so that all prayer to God is done with a pure mind and heart. To become entirely occupied with God, however, requires a monk to be unimpeded by anything that is earthly.

However, the primary difference between the distinction implied between the Upright and Perfect in the *Book of Steps* and that between the two levels of ascetic achievement described by John of Lycopolis is the emphasis on separation from the world. Despite the fact that the Perfect in the *Book of Steps* renounce all that is earthly to assume the likeness of angels, the Upright are encouraged to maintain their connections

⁹⁸ *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, 62.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 62.

to the world, including marriage and family. Thus, despite the imperfection of the Upright, God does have compassion for them and the role they have in fulfilling His commandments. In fact, the author accepts, albeit reluctantly, marriage and family life as a divine provision:¹⁰⁰

Unless you will have been so excellent, even if your freedom listened to that malicious person [Satan] and desired [marriage], just as Adam, your creator with rage will grant it to you, as it was for Adam, and He is angry, because you abandon the purity of the angels and make like beasts of burden, and He will have compassion for you, as it was for Adam, and you will observe justice [Uprightness] and be alive as long as you are in marriage.¹⁰¹

This is quite reminiscent of Aphrahat's preference for virginity, and, as we shall later see in the following chapter, Ephrem also reluctantly admitted the sanctity of marriage. In this regard, then, it should not be concluded that the *Book of Steps* is "unambiguously opposed to possessions, marriage and family life."¹⁰²

Yet, one cannot help but note that it appears that the author favours the life of total renunciation, that is to say the life of the Perfect.¹⁰³ On a number of occasions, and reminiscent of the above passages on Aphrahat, worldly marriage is likened to as a barrier to perfection: "Moreover the Perfect do not take wives, nor do they work the earth, nor do they possess wealth, nor do they have seats with leaders in the world, just as

¹⁰⁰ Kitchen, "Becoming Perfect," 40.

¹⁰¹ *Book of Steps* 15.7, ed. M. Kmosko. *Patrologia Syrica* 3 (Paris, 1926), p. 351: "Nisi talis fueris, etiam libertas tua obediet maligno et appetes illud, ut Adam, concedetque tibi cum furore creator tuus, sicut Adae, et irascitur, quia relictis sanctitate angelorum assimilamur iumento, et miserebitur tui, sicut Adae, et observata iustitia vives dum in coniugio es."

¹⁰² John H. Corbett, "They Do Not Take Wives, or Build, or Work the Ground: Ascetic Life in the Early Syriac Church," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 3 (2003): 9-10.

¹⁰³ Corbett argues that the Perfect were not considered to be a 'cultural elite' but rather 'charismatic ascetics.' See idem, "They Do Not Take Wives," 7. It is also interesting to note that Kitchen that the structured life-style and discipline of the Upright "gradually moved them closer to the heights of Perfection, if only they could become poor and spouseless. To see a fourth-century ascetical writer lauding a group of Christians who have not totally embraced the full ascetical ideal is remarkable if not unique." From this one realizes that the author of the *Book of Steps* praised and valued the Upright, although sometimes the opposite appears to be so. See Kitchen, "Becoming Perfect," 42.

their Teacher [Christ].”¹⁰⁴ In fact, in reference to 1 Corinthians 7:32 the author notes that the unmarried’s sole concern is to please God: “The Perfect life is this: *Virgins, who are not married to a man, and a man, who does not take a wife, they please the Lord in body and spirit; those in true marriage, they in turn please each other.*” Yet, this is followed by Hebrews 13:4 and again an acknowledgement of the sanctity of marriage: “But the path, that thus leads you, is this: *Marriage, it is said, is in honour, and let the marriage bed of those be kept pure.*”¹⁰⁵

Furthering this comparison with Aphrahat is the notion that the unmarried assume the likeness of angels:

The Perfect life is this: *Men who do not take wives and women who are not wedded to men, they are just as angels, they can not die. And those who do not abandon in all respects wives and sons and families, which all they have in the earth, are not worthy of me.*¹⁰⁶

Since angels are not of the earthly world, it follows then that the Perfect do not involve themselves with these matters either: “Angels do not cultivate the earth, clothe the naked, satiate the hungry.”¹⁰⁷ In assuming the likeness of angels, then, the Perfect do not work, take care of the sick, or feed the hungry. These social or worldly responsibilities

¹⁰⁴ *Book of Steps* 15.13, pp. 366-67: “Perfecti autem non ducunt uxores, nec operantur in terra, nec opes possident, nec habent reclinatorium capiti in terra, velut Doctor eorum.”

¹⁰⁵ *Book of Steps* 19.15, pp. 475-478: “Vita perfecta haec est: *Virgo, quae viro non nubit, et vir, qui uxorem non ducit, Dñō placent corpore et spiritu; qui vero matrimonium ineunt, sibi invicem placent.*” And: “Semita autem, quae te ab illa deducit, haec est: *Matrimonium, inquit, in honore est, et lectus eorum castus est.*”

¹⁰⁶ *Book of Steps* 19.14, p. 475: “Vita perfecta haec est: Viri, qui uxores non ducunt, et mulieres, quae viris non nubunt, velut angeli erunt, nec mori poterunt. Et qui non relinquit uxorem et filios et cognationem suam et omnia, quae habet in terra, non est me dignus.” (Thanks to Dr. T.A. Smith, University of St. Michael’s College, for his help with this translation.) The author even offers an exegesis on Matthew 19:6, which is Christ’s comment on Genesis 2:42 “What God has connected, you will not separate.” (“Quod Deus coniunxit, vos ne separetis.”) This is the same passage in which Aphrahat discusses in the above section. See also *Book of Steps* 25.8 which comments on Luke 20:36: “Indeed the Perfect are just as angels, in the same way the Lord said: Those who will have been worthy in the resurrection, they cannot die, but they will be just as angels.” (“Perfecti enim velut angeli sunt, sicut dixit Dñs: Qui hac resurrectione digni fuerint, non poterunt mori, sed velut angeli erunt.”)

¹⁰⁷ *Book of Steps* 25.8, p. 751: “Angeli terram non colunt, nudos non vestiunt, esurientes non saturant.” (Thanks to Dr. Pablo Argarate, University of St. Michael’s College, for his help with this translation.)

are left to the Upright.¹⁰⁸ The goal then, as it was with Aphrahat, is to return to the paradisiacal state “as Adam was in the beginning.”¹⁰⁹ Again, this is only achieved through the renunciation of the earthly life. Thus, in order to return to the paradisiacal state, “the family of Adam” will have to have “abandoned wealth and possessions of the earth and its entire beauty.”¹¹⁰ Thus, Christ serves as the example for the Perfect in their attempt to answer their call to the ascetical celibate life:¹¹¹

And He sent His Son, who has reconciled the celestial and the terrestrial and displays in His person the perfection and holiness of Adam the original creation, just as He said: *All things from the beginning have been renewed through Jesus.*¹¹²

Thus, the Perfect can be understood as being the exact opposite of the Upright. That is to say they lived a life of total renunciation and are described as living in the imitation of Christ. Homily nineteen describes the path taken by the Perfect on their journey toward the Kingdom of Heaven. This path is difficult and requires complete separation from the world in order to become an *ihidāyā*:

“If you wish to become an ihidaya, and are eager to go quickly to the city of our Lord Jesus, then lend me the ears of your mind and I will show you how to reach the city of our King by a direct way – provided you have the strength to travel in the way I shall show you, for the gradients which I shall direct you to go up are very steep...Now the end of your road is full maturity (or: perfection), and it commences when you begin to uproot from yourself all your failings...So it is with the hidden road which goes to the hidden city: many side roads lead off it in all sorts of directions, and if there is no one who knows the road which goes to that country who can direct you and point out to you all the side roads that lead off it, you will be unable to travel directly, and you will miss the swift route in pursuit of full maturity; you will depart this world without having become fully mature, and you will not longer be able to be with our Lord in his city and kingdom in that world nor will you enter that city of the saints.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ *Book of Steps* 14.1, p. 323.

¹⁰⁹ Corbett, “They Do Not Take Wives,” 9.

¹¹⁰ *Book of Steps* 20.6, p. 539: “Mandato enim transgresso ad ista prolapsa est familia Adae; et nisi reliquerint opes et possessiones terrae et totam pulchritudinem eius.”

¹¹¹ Kitchen, “Becoming Perfect,” 37.

¹¹² *Book of Steps* 25.2, p. 735: Et misit Filium suum, qui reconciliavit caelestes et terrestres et ostendit perfectionem et sanctitatem creaturae Adam pristinae manifeste in sua persona, sicut dixit: *Omnia ab initio renovata sunt per Jesum.*

¹¹³ *Book of Steps* 19.1 (Brock translation) in *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*. Moran Etho 9 (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1997), 169-70.

The author of the *Book of Steps* shares with Aphrahat and Ephrem in their observations of a changing ascetic community. In fact, he accuses the Perfect of polluting the ascetic ideal and way to perfection. As Kitchen makes evident, this reprimand is clearly sounded in homily 29:

Because you do not restrict your bodies from food, nor make supplication to our Lord that he set you free, there are many sickly and ill people among you and many who sleep and many who are drunken, greedy, and unrestrained, because they do not examine themselves and subdue their bodies.¹¹⁴

Thus, “no one accomplishes righteousness with his heart who does not also accomplish righteousness with his body.”¹¹⁵ In other words, the body and soul must fast physically and spiritually respectively in order to take the difficult spiritual road of the Perfect.

Again, these similar comments and observations by Aphrahat, Ephrem, and the author of the *Book of Steps* reveal that all three writers shared in a common milieu and ascetic tradition.¹¹⁶ Perhaps these common censures against their respective communities reveal further similarities. While Ephrem’s role in the church is known to be that of a deacon, one may conclude that given these certain similarities, Aphrahat and the author of the *Book of Steps* also spoke to their communities as authority figures.

In closing this chapter on Aphrahat, the *Book of Steps*, and the manner in which they represent the Syrian proto-monastic tradition, the words of Aelred Baker are appropriate:

But taking the available fourth-century Syriac literature, Ephrem, Aphraates and *Liber Graduum*, together, one cannot help thinking that the internal struggle against moral evil was an integral and central part of their vision of Christianity, so that those who could be called ‘ascetics’ were not characters who rebelled against the establishment and ran off

¹¹⁴ *Book of Steps* 8.1, as quoted in Kitchen, “Becoming Perfect,” 38.

¹¹⁵ Kitchen, “Becoming Perfect,” 35.

¹¹⁶ This is not to suggest that the distinction between the Uprights and Perfects present in the *Book of Steps* appears in the works of Ephrem. Rather, the point that is being made is that these three authors respond to conflict within their respective communities in similar ways. Such similarities, as I am arguing, result from these three authors belonging to and sharing in the same fourth-century Syrian proto-monastic tradition.

into the desert, but simply the more dedicated spirits in the whole community. They were not apart but in the very midst of the Christian society.¹¹⁷

In other words, the character or nature of the asceticism displayed in the fourth-century Syriac literature did not follow the model of the Antonian hermit. Athanasius describes Anthony as living a life of solitude and withdrawal from the world, entombed in a cell.¹¹⁸ In fact, a frequent metaphor that occurs in the literature of the desert, associated with this notion of withdrawal or death to the world, is that of a monk's cell as a tomb. The cell was of important spiritual significance to the hermit: it was thought as the place of temptation and struggle, as well as the site where these thoughts and bodily passions were to be brought into submission. More importantly, however, the cell was a tomb where the earthly body of the ascetic essentially died as temptations were overcome. Anthony the Great stressed the importance of the cell in achieving an inner stillness:

Just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so monks who loiter outside their cells or pass their time with men of the world lose the intensity of inner peace. So like a fish going towards the sea, we must hurry to reach our cell, for fear that if we delay outside we will lose our interior watchfulness.¹¹⁹

Reflecting this same imagery is a saying of John the Dwarf: "Shut yourself in a tomb as though you were already dead, so that at all times you will think death is near."¹²⁰ John repeats the same sentiments as Evagrius by stressing that a monk should act as if they were dead to the world, so that when the eternal judgment arrives "there will be no fault in your soul."¹²¹ Abba Poemen was censured by Ammonas for not keeping this stillness of heart. When he approached his elder to complain that his brother was talking to others and making too much noise, Abba Ammonas said to him: "Poemen, are you still alive?

¹¹⁷ Baker, "Syriac and the Origins of Monasticism," 346.

¹¹⁸ Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 14.

¹¹⁹ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 3.

¹²⁰ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 92.

¹²¹ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 64.

Go, sit down in your cell; engrave it on your heart that you have been in the tomb for a year already.”¹²² Poemen’s focus was on the world and the voice of his brother, and thus his heart was easily distracted away from God. Ammonas’ advice to go back to the cell as a remedy for worldly distractions again makes use of the imagery of dying to the world, and clearly shows the cell as the ‘tomb’ in which this spiritual death occurs.

This concept of the ascetic becoming dead to the world is a common one, and interestingly enough, is how Simeon was described, as we have already seen, by his Byzantine hagiographers. Furthermore, Cassian, for example, tells of a monk who refused to go to the side of his dying father to receive his inheritance. Instead, he turned his family away by telling them: “I died to the world before he did and the dead do not inherit from the living.”¹²³ Reflecting this same imagery is a story of Abba Poemen, who simply ignored a question posed of him from Abba Anoub. When his fellow brothers questioned his perceived offensiveness, Poemen replied: “It is not my business, for I am dead and a dead man does not speak.”¹²⁴ In these examples, the monks refuse to involve themselves in any earthy affairs, and express this through the imagery of death as a separation from the material world. One turns away his family and his old earthly life, while the other does not even speak to the matters of the flesh. Therefore, the first step in the new spiritual life of a desert hermit was to renounce the world and with it all his earthly and bodily desires. The world was thought to be sinful and therefore a place of temptation and spiritual distraction. John of Lycopolis makes this clear to his disciples: “everyone who has not renounced the world fully and completely but chases after its

¹²² *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 164.

¹²³ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 114-15.

¹²⁴ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 164.

attractions suffers from this spiritual instability.”¹²⁵ Such a clinging to the remnants of a former earthly life served only to preoccupy the monk’s mind with passions of the flesh, which blinds the heart from God’s love.

However, this radical lifestyle of Anthony and the other Desert Fathers, at least in terms of a severe break from the world, was not that of Syrian proto-monastic tradition. The cell had no real prominence or purpose, despite the fact that Aphrahat speaks of a separation from the world and the *Book of Steps* describes the Perfect as renouncing all earthly responsibilities. As we have seen, the separation they speak of is from earthly luxuries and not necessarily a physical separation from the world. Again this is evident from the reprimands noted above which Ephrem, Aphrahat and the author of the *Book of Steps* give to their respective communities. This continued involvement within a community of men and women, either virgin or married, lies in sharp contrast to the absolute separation from community presented by the early Egyptian monastic tradition. Thus, unlike the Antonian model, these three Syrian ascetic authors were not only members of a church community, but they were also involved in promoting a moral standard that they believed was necessary for an *ihîdāyâ* to become like the *Îhîdāyâ*. Again, while *ihîdāyâ* later took on the meaning of the Greek *monachos*, meaning monk or solitary, its primary meaning in the time of Ephrem and Aphrahat and the author of the *Book of Steps* referred to the unity of man with God.¹²⁶ This unity was absolutely necessary to achieve the goal of the ascetic life; the return to the eschatological paradise. Thomas Kathanar Koonammakkal’s words, here, are worth repeating: “The singleness of God, the singleness of Christ and the singleness of Adam in Paradise were thought of as

¹²⁵ *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, 55.

¹²⁶ AbouZayd, *IHIDAYUTHA*, 269; see also Sebastian Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 26.

combined in one ideal goal.”¹²⁷ This is quite different from the Egyptian ascetic tradition and its understanding of the absolute necessity for separation from all that is worldly. However, this is not to suggest that the goal of the ascetic life in the Egyptian deserts was not to live a life in imitation of Christ. Likewise, one cannot conclude that there are no congruencies between Anthony and the Desert fathers and the asceticism of Syrian proto-monasticism as represented by Ephrem, Aphrahat and the *Book of Steps*: the prominence of themes such as the angelic life, living in full contemplation on God, and some form of renunciation of worldly possessions all produce many points of comparison between the traditions. However, while the angelic life was also very important in the Egyptian tradition, as was a life entirely focused on the rewards of heaven, the literary expression of these goals is quite different. While a prominent theme in the desert literature is a monk’s anticipation of his/her own death, the concern for Aphrahat, the *Book of Steps*, and as we shall see, Ephrem was the anticipation of a new life in Christ. Baptism, in Aphrahat and Ephrem, renewed one’s virginal state and gave hope that one may achieve paradise on earth. The focus for Anthony and the Desert Fathers was not necessarily on the present life, but on the future rewards of heaven. In this regard, then, there are no descriptions of great ascetic feats in Ephrem, Aphrahat or the *Book of Steps* as they are to be found in the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* and the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. There are no tales of monks burdening themselves with heavy chains or searing their flesh with hot irons, but rather the literature of Syrian proto-monasticism gives one a sense of community and pastoral concern.

¹²⁷ Koonammakkal, “Ephrem’s Ideas on Singleness,” <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Koonammakkal.html>; see also Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 31-32.

In other words, then, Aphrahat, Ephrem, and the author of the *Book of Steps* did not understand the first step in the new spiritual life of an *ihidāyā* to be the complete renunciation of the world. Rather, as we shall see in Ephrem, baptism had priority as the first step toward a life in imitation of Christ. The ascetic ideal promulgated by Ephrem, Aphrahat, and the *Book of Steps* centered on the goal of living a life in perfect imitation of Christ. This becomes evident in a number of common themes, such as marriage, virginity, and the angelic life. We have already noted the similarities between Ephrem and Aphrahat on these issues, and much of the same can be said when comparing Ephrem and what the *Book of Steps* has to say. Does all this mean, then, that Ephrem completely adopts this literary ascetic milieu he shared with Aphrahat and the author of the *Book of Steps*? This appears to be the case, for the Syrian shares much with his historical and literary contemporaries, specifically the notion of the *ihidāyā*. However, as we shall see in the following chapter, Ephrem slightly deviates from this milieu by tempering or softening his understanding of marriage. In fact, the Syrian characterizes both virgins and those who are married as being able to attain the angelic life. This was not evident in Aphrahat or the *Book of Steps*, despite their reluctant acceptance of marriage as a blessed institution.

Having thus outlined the historical context, that is to say both Ephrem's own historical situation and the historiography of his *vita*, and the literary context shared with Aphrahat and the *Book of Steps* that outline the basic precepts and ideals of Syrian proto-monasticism, it is now it is now appropriate to turn toward Ephrem and a discussion of his own ascetic ideal.

IV. The Ascetic Ideal of Saint Ephrem the Syrian

From the brief discussion of the historical and literary contexts of Ephrem, it becomes evident that the Syrian was never formally a monk (at least in terms of living an organized form of religious life reminiscent of what was found in the Egyptian deserts and later in Syria). Rather, Ephrem belonged to a native Syrian proto-monastic tradition that involved some form of a consecrated life: a life which began, as we shall see, with baptism. Central to this life, as most evident in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*, is the notion of living a life in full and complete imitation of Christ the *Îhîdāyâ*. The goal of all this was to return to the paradisiacal state of Adam, and to assume the likeness of angels.

The purpose of this chapter is not only to suggest that the ascetic ideal of Ephrem centers on the notion of discipleship to Christ, but also to show how this is revealed in a number of ascetically concerned themes throughout his work. In this regard, then, attention will be given to certain themes, symbols, and metaphors of the milieu he shared with Aphrahat and the author of the *Book of Steps*. What will emerge is a type or expression of asceticism different from what was developing in the Egyptian desert at the same time.

IV.I – Church and Community

The most obvious difference between Syrian proto-monasticism and the perceived prestigious Egyptian ascetic tradition was in their settings. Despite Palladius' characterization of Ephrem, the Syrian was not a solitary monk in a desert, but rather a member of a church congregation. As we have already noted, Ephrem was a deacon in the churches of Nisibis and Edessa. This setting becomes evident in his *Nisibene Hymns* which reveal that his audience was not comprised of solitary monks, but rather members

of a church community.¹²⁸ “Speak and give glory, my delivered ones on this day; old men and boys, young men and maidens, children and innocents, and thou, O Church, mother of the city!”¹²⁹ As a deacon, then, Ephrem speaks for his congregation when praising God for His mercy and grace.

There are many instances in Ephrem’s writings in which he lashes out against his church community for hypocrisy and behaviours uncharacteristic of an *ihîdāyâ*. For instance, in the *Letter to Publius*, Ephrem tells of a vision he had of virgins in the flames of Gehenna:

I saw there pure virgins whose virginity, because it was not adorned with the precious ointment of desirable deeds, was rejected...I drew near to the gate of the kingdom of heaven and I saw there those who did not bear the title “virgin” who were crowned with victorious deeds, for their virtues filled the place of virginity. For just as those who had been espoused to Him only in their bodies had been rejected because they were naked of any garment of good deeds, so too those who had espoused their bodies in a chaste marriage while their spirit was bound to the love of their Lord were chosen, and they wore their love for Him like a robe with [their] desire for Him stretched over all their limbs.¹³⁰

We will later return to these images of oil, robes, and the Bridegroom. For now it is enough to note that Ephrem is instructing the *bnay* and *bnath Qyāmâ* on the requirements of the higher spiritual life. Sidney Griffith has suggested that this passage indicates that Ephrem recognized a decline in the moral standard of his community, an observation, as we have already noted, shared with Aphrahat and the *Book of Steps*.¹³¹ An *ihîdāyâ*, then, must live in complete imitation of Christ the *Îhîdāyâ*. In other words, and as is evident in this passage, the asceticism of the body must mirror that of the soul. It is not simply enough to be chaste in body, but one must also chastise the soul toward those virtuous

¹²⁸ Mathews, “The Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian,” 28.

¹²⁹ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 2.6, p. 169.

¹³⁰ Ephrem, *Letter to Publius* 15, p. 350

¹³¹ Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria,” 236.

merits, acts, and deeds. To do otherwise, as was seen with these “pure virgins,” would render one incapable of putting on the robe of Christ.¹³²

Ephrem was very much involved in the everyday duties and responsibilities associated with the role of a deacon. As he ministered to the parishioners, and at times even offered encouragement and guidance to his younger bishops, Ephrem involved himself entirely in the spiritual development of this community.¹³³ The introduction to his *Commentary on Genesis* even suggests that he used his hymns and homilies as study aids or guides to Scripture and the way to the proper life:¹³⁴

I had not wanted to write a commentary on the first book of Creation, lest we should now repeat what we had set down in the metrical homilies and hymns. Nevertheless, compelled by the love of friends, we have written briefly of those things of which we wrote at length in the metrical homilies and in the hymns.¹³⁵

The *Hymns on Faith* even relate an image of a catechumen and Ephrem as the teacher of the orthodox faith:

Be not dismayed, you catechumen, if
the one initiated is confused!
Be not infected, all you novices,
if he that's versed in language is adrift!
If your instructor goes astray, then go
and meditate upon the Books yourself!
Enquiring minds have gone astray, but your
discerning mind need not be tangled, too.
The teachers are mistaken; all the same,
the catechumens need not be dismayed.¹³⁶

¹³² This is reminiscent of the tenth homily, “On Fasting and the Humility of Body and Soul,” in the *Book of Steps*. As Kitchen argues the body must fast from food and material pleasures, while the soul must fast from emotional controversies such as jealousy and anger. In this regard, then, the body and soul mirror each other in terms of their asceticism and in their desire to imitate Christ. See Kitchen, “Becoming Perfect,” 35.

¹³³ Nisibis 15-16 act as a defense, in the form of advice, of Vologeses against his critics.

¹³⁴ Andrew Palmer, “Single Human Being Divided in Himself: Ephraim the Syrian, the Man in the Middle.” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 1:2 (July 1998): <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No2/HV1N2Palmer.html>.

¹³⁵ Ephrem, “Commentary on Genesis,” in *St. Ephrem the Syrian. Selected Prose Works*, trans. Matthews, E.G. and J.P. Amar. *Fathers of the Church* 91, ed. Kathleen McVey (Washington: Catholic University Press of America, 1994), Prologue 1, p. 67.

¹³⁶ *Hymns on Faith* 6.163-72; as quoted in Palmer, “Single Human Being Divided in Himself,” <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No2/HV1N2Palmer.html>.

Ephrem names the bishops under whom he served as deacon – Jacob (303-338 C.E.), Babu (338-346 C.E.), Vologeses (346-361 C.E.), and Abraham (361-363 C.E.).¹³⁷ In so doing, he also gives further insight into not only the role he played within the church but also the setting of the ascetic ideal he promulgated. It is in this section of this collection of hymns that he calls himself their “disciple.”¹³⁸ In this regard, then, the ascetic virtues that he extends to the faithful are the same as those practiced by these bishops.¹³⁹ This is important to note, especially when one considers Ephrem’s praise of Vologeses: “In two abodes was he – a solitary recluse from *his early* days; - for he was holy within his body, - and solitary within his dwelling; - openly and secretly was he chaste.”¹⁴⁰ While it appears that Ephrem is praising the solitary anchoritic lifestyle, his emphasis here is more on Vologeses’ imitation of Christ. The Bishop is described as a solitary, that is to say an *ihîdāyâ* or single in heart, mind, and purpose. Elsewhere, Ephrem characterizes the role of bishops, specifically Abraham of Nisibis, as that of shepherd: “I will speak of the shepherd, under him who has become head of the flock.”¹⁴¹ Likewise: “A new shepherd for him it is right, that he should oversee the flock in new wise, and should know what is the number of it, and should see what are its needs.”¹⁴² As Robert Murray has explained, the figure or image of the shepherd is a type of Christ.¹⁴³ In fact, Ephrem relates this image of the Shepherd to the incarnation of Christ in his *Hymns on the Resurrection*:

¹³⁷ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 13-21, pp. 180-93.

¹³⁸ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 14.25, p. 182.

¹³⁹ Mathews, “The Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian,” 29.

¹⁴⁰ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 15.9, p. 184.

¹⁴¹ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 17.1, p. 186.

¹⁴² Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 20.3, p. 190. The *Book of Steps* also uses this image of the shepherd in relation to the leader of the ascetic community. See Hymn 12.6 in Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*.

¹⁴³ Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 190.

The Shepherd of all flew down
 in search of Adam, the sheep that had strayed;
 on His shoulders He carried him, taking him up:
 he was an offering for the Lord of the flock.
 Blessed is His descent!¹⁴⁴

Thus, not only are bishops characterized as shepherds tending and caring for their flocks - perhaps the *bnay* and *bnath Qyāmā* - but Ephrem also argues that they are married to the Church. Speaking again of Abraham of Nisibis, Ephrem compares this bishop to Abraham's chastity in his marriage to Sarah:

Thou who answerest to the name of Abraham, in that Thou art made father of many; but because to Thee none is spouse, as Sarah was to Abraham, -lo! Thy flock is Thy spouse; bring up her sons in Thy truth; spiritual children may they be to Thee, and the sons be sons of promise, that they may become heirs in Eden.¹⁴⁵

Interestingly enough, the Church is also characterized as being the Bride of Christ:

Let Cana thank You for gladdening her banquet!
 The bridegroom's crown exalted You for exalting it,
 and the bride's crown belonged to Your victory.
 In her mirror allegories are expounded and traced,
 for You portrayed Your church in the bride,
 and in her guests, Yours are traced,
 and in her magnificence she portrays Your advent.¹⁴⁶

This relationship between the Church and Christ is developed even further in the *Hymns on Paradise*:

God planted the fair Garden
 He built the pure Church;
 upon the Tree of Knowledge
 He established the injunction
 He gave joy, but they took no delight,
 He gave admonition, but they were unafraid.
 In the Church He implanted
 the Word
 which causes rejoicing with its promises,
 which causes fear with its warnings:
 he who despises the Word, perishes,
 he who takes warning, lives.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Ephrem, "Hymns on the Resurrection 1.2," in *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem*, trans. Sebastian Brock, 2nd ed. Studies Supplementary to Sobornost 4 (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1983), p. 27.

¹⁴⁵ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 19.1, p. 188.

¹⁴⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 33.1, p. 407.

¹⁴⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 6.7, p. 111.

Not only, then, does the Church correspond to an eschatological Paradise, but it also serves as the setting in which an *ihîdāyâ* can regain the paradisiacal state.¹⁴⁸ In other words, since the Word is in the Church, the bride of Christ, the Church, or at least its community, is necessary to an *ihîdāyâ* in retrieving union with God.

The importance of the Church and its ecclesiastical organization to Ephrem's ascetic ideal lies in their connection to the notion or concept of the *ihîdāyâ*. Thus, given that the bishop is a type of Christ and wedded to the Church which has been imparted with the knowledge of the Word, it can be understood then that Ephrem's discipleship to his bishops is in fact a discipleship to Christ the *ihîdāyâ*. In other words, what Ephrem is doing is not only associating Christ with the bishops (through the shared title of 'shepherd'), nor with the Church (as the possessor of His truth): he is also making known, through the interconnectedness of all these images, that his ascetic ideal is in line with being in complete discipleship to Christ. Interestingly enough, Ephrem uses the image of the shepherd tending a flock to characterize his role in the church:

Let not, O Lord, the toils of your shepherd boy be defiled
For I did not disturb your flock but, so far I was able
I held off the wolves from them and I have built so far as I could
Folds of hymns for the lambs of your flock...¹⁴⁹

As Mathews notes: "Although the particular circumstances of this pastoral activity of Ephrem are unknown to us, it is clear that this ministry was not congruent with the lifestyle of the ascetics as described in any of those texts that came out of the Greek tradition."¹⁵⁰ In other words, the asceticism of Ephrem does not fully resemble that of

¹⁴⁸ Brock makes the distinction between the Church as an eschatological Paradise which can be regained while on earth through baptism, and Heaven as the celestial Paradise that only is achieved in the End of Days, and with the resurrection of the dead. See Brock, *Hymns of Paradise*, 67. See also pp. 49-57 for a discussion on the multifaceted meaning of Paradise in Ephrem's writings.

¹⁴⁹ Hymns Against Heresies 56:10; as quoted in Mathews, "The Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian," 28

¹⁵⁰ Mathews, "The Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian," 31.

Anthony the Great or those Byzantine characterizations of the Syrian by Palladius or Sozomen. Finally, in conclusion to his notice on Bishop Abraham, Ephrem not only states that his bishop was an example to all of the flock, but the Syrian ends with a comment on his role in the Church: “*Blessed be He Who has made me His harp!*”¹⁵¹

Thus, it has become evident that the Church, with its ecclesiastical organization and its community of believers, is absolutely necessary to the ascetic ideal of Ephrem. In fact, not only does it provide the setting for the practice of his asceticism, but it also mirrors the final goal of all ascetics: that is to be in full union with Christ and the restoration of Adam’s paradisiacal state. At this point, it is necessary to turn toward the theme of baptism as it provided the manner for entry into this community, which in turn began an *ihîdāyâ*’s ascetic journey. Thus, while the Church is described as being the bride of Christ, the baptized soul is also characterized by Ephrem as possessing this special relationship.¹⁵² Christ, then, is not only in the Church, but He is also in all His followers.¹⁵³

IV.II - Baptism

Ephrem understood baptism as the first step toward a life in imitation of Christ, rather than separation from the world as seen with the Desert Fathers. Thus, at baptism the believer embarks on a consecrated life, a life in which an *ihîdāyâ* symbolically puts on Christ the *Îhîdāyâ*:

Lo! the sword of our Lord in the waters!
that which divides sons and fathers:
for it is the living sword that makes
division, lo! of the living from the dying.

¹⁵¹ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 17.12, p. 187.

¹⁵² For a discussion on *ihîdāyûtâ* (*ihidayutha*), that is to say singleness, and its relationship to the *ihîdāyâ* see Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 13;16 and Robert Murray, “The Exhortation to Candidates for Ascetical Vows at Baptism in the Ancient Syriac Church.” *New Testament Studies* 21 (1974-75): 59-80.

¹⁵³ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 25, pp. 369-75.

Lo! they are baptized and they become
 Virgins and saints,
 who have gone down, been baptized and put on
 the One Only begotten.
 Lo! many have come boldly to Him!

For whoso have been baptized and put on Him
 the Only begotten the Lord of the many,
 has filled thereby the place of many,
 for to him Christ has become a great treasure:
 for He became in the wilderness
 a table of good meats,
 and He became at the marriage feast
 a fountain of choice wines.
 He has become *such* to all in all things,
 by helps and healings and promises.¹⁵⁴

Baptism, then, joined Christ to his disciples in such a way that they become “virgins and saints.” This is reminiscent of Aphrahat’s emphasis or argument that baptism actually restores the virginal state, that is to say humanity’s state before the Fall. From this perspective, if the Church is understood as Paradise restored then entry by baptism into this community must therefore restore the paradisiacal state of Adam.¹⁵⁵ Thus, through the incarnation of Christ, which we shall later see is the counterpart to baptism, baptism whitens and restores the “robe of glory to human beings” that was lost through the original sin of Adam and Eve.¹⁵⁶

Among the saints none is naked,
 for they have put on glory
 nor is any clad in those leaves
 or standing in shame,
 for they have found, through our Lord,
 the robe that belongs to Adam and Eve.
 As the Church

¹⁵⁴ Ephrem, *Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany* 8.17-18, p. 278.

¹⁵⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 2.7; 15.8; *Commentary on Genesis* 2.14.2, p. 106; talk of how Adam was “stripped of [the robe of] glory” for not keeping God’s commandments. See *Hymns on the Nativity* 17.4 for a characterization of Eve’s loss of the “garment of glory” and Mary’s restoration of this robe. See also *Hymns on Virginity* 3.2; 16.9; 29.11; 48.15; 51.7 for the original attributes of Adam and Eve, that is to say, humanity before the Fall. These attributes are restored upon baptism. Interestingly enough, in *Hymns of the Fast* 3, Ephrem characterizes the incarnation of Christ as a “Robe of Glory” that was sent to cover (forgive the nakedness and shame of Adam’s sin. See also note 141 above on the Robe of Glory in the baptismal waters of the Jordan River.

¹⁵⁶ Ephrem, “Hymns on the Nativity,” in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey, The Classics of Western Spirituality 66 (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), Hymn 5.4, p. 106.

purges her ears
of the serpent's poison,
those who had lost their garments,
having listened to it and become diseased,
have now been renewed and whitened.¹⁵⁷

Sebastian Brock relates the importance of this garment imagery in the hymns and homilies of Ephrem:

The Robe of Glory thus provides the thread which links up between the primordial and the eschatological Paradise, and the mention of it in any one context is immediately to conjure up in the reader's mind the entire span of salvation history, thus admirably emphasizing, for example, the place of each individual Christian's Baptism within the divine economy as a whole.¹⁵⁸

In this regard, then, Ephrem characterizes baptism as the event in which the believer puts on Christ and strips away the "utterly hateful old man."¹⁵⁹ Similarly, like oil-paints on a blank canvas, the oil of baptism restores the image of God in the baptized:

With visible pigments the image of kingship is portrayed,
and with visible oil is portrayed the hidden image of our hidden
King.
With the drawings that baptism labors to bring forth in her
womb
from the portrayal of the primal man who was corrupted
she portrays a new image, and she gives birth to them with three
labor pangs
that [are] the three glorious names of the Father and Son and Holy
Spirit.

Oil is, therefore, the friend of the Holy Spirit and Her minister.
As a disciple it accompanies Her, since by it She seals priests and
anointed ones,
for the Holy Spirit by the Anointed brands Her sheep.
In the symbol of the signet ring that in sealing wax marks its
Imprint,
also the hidden mark of the Spirit is imprinted by the oil on bodies
anointed in baptism and sealed in the dipping.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 6.9, p. 112; *Commentary on Genesis* 2.23 discusses the "serpent's poison." Ephrem also comments in this section that if Adam and Eve had rejected the serpent they would have been given infallible knowledge and immortal life.

¹⁵⁸ Brock, *Hymns of Paradise*, 67.

¹⁵⁹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 1.1, p. 261.

¹⁶⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 7.5-6, p. 294. Ephrem also uses the image of painting in reference to the betrothal of virgins to Christ. See *Hymns on Virginity* 24.5, p. 366.

Thus, the oil of baptism symbolizes forgiveness and rebirth of the *ihidāyā* in Christ,
 “for oil blots out debts as the Flood blotted out the unclean.”¹⁶¹ In fact, baptism gives an
 angelic likeness to all those who receive this chrism:

The freeman who has put on, that Angel in the waters,
 is as the fellow of servants, that he may be made like to the Lord,
 Who became bondman unto bondmen.¹⁶²

Likewise:

For lo! the Angels rejoice over one sinner if he repent:
 how much more do they now rejoice
 that in all churches and congregations,
 lo! Baptism is bringing forth
 the heavenly from the earthly!¹⁶³

This divinization of humanity at baptism works as a counterpart to Christ’s
 incarnation:¹⁶⁴

Divinity flew down
 to rescue and lift up humanity
 Behold the Son adorned the servant’s flaw,
 so that he became god as he had desired.¹⁶⁵

Interestingly enough, Ephrem characterizes the baptism of Christ as one of His four
 births, the other three being the generation from the Father, the incarnation from Mary,
 and the resurrection:¹⁶⁶ “Thus, the Word not only ‘puts on a body,’ but He also ‘puts on
 the water of baptism.’”¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, the Syrian describes the baptism of Christ as
 offering the possibility for everlasting life: “The Anointed, a nature that does not die, put

¹⁶¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 7.9, p. 295.

¹⁶² Ephrem, *Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany* 4.8, p. 271. In *Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany* 3.1 Ephrem relates Christ’s presence in the oil of baptism: “Christ and chrism are conjoined; the secret with the visible is mingled: the chrism anoints visibly, -Christ seals secretly, the lambs newborn and spiritual, the praise of His twofold victory; for He engendered it of the chrism, and He gave it birth of the water.”

¹⁶³ Ephrem, *Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany* 6.8, p. 273.

¹⁶⁴ Koonammakkal, “Ephrem’s Ideas on Singleness,” <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Koonammakkal.html>.

¹⁶⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 48.17-18, p. 455.

¹⁶⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 31, pp. 398-402.

¹⁶⁷ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 90.

on a mortal body; / He dove down and brought up from the water the living treasure of / the house of Adam.”¹⁶⁸ Ephrem describes the baptism of Adam in similar terms:

In Baptism Adam found *again*
that glory that was among the trees of *Eden*.
He went down, and received it out of the water;
he put it on, and went up and was adorned therein.
Blessed be He that has mercy on all!¹⁶⁹

As we shall later see, Ephrem will repeat this motif of diving for treasure when he uses the image of the pearl. For now, it is enough to note that Ephrem understood Christ as the second Adam, existing in a paradisiacal state, whose baptism and “redeeming work had made salvation possible for humanity and brought the promise of a return to Paradise, to the perfect life as it was lived by Adam and Eve before their Fall.”¹⁷⁰ In other words, then, the goal of the *ihîdāyâ* was to become “single as Adam was single when he was created,” the very state of the *Îhîdāyâ* at the Incarnation.¹⁷¹ Thus, an *ihîdāyâ*’s imitation of Christ’s baptism not only signaled the beginning of one’s consecrated life, but it also symbolically represented an expression of one’s desire to return to the paradisiacal state.

Elsewhere, and furthering this theme of divinization, Ephrem relates humanity’s desire to become angel-like:

The Exalted One knew that Adam had desired to become a
god,
so He sent His Son who put him on, to give him his desire!¹⁷²

Thus, when Christ “came down, put on [a body] and ascended,” He in effect raised humanity to the level of angels:¹⁷³ “The Watcher came to make watchers in creation.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 7.10, p. 295.

¹⁶⁹ Ephrem, *Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany* 12.1, p. 282.

¹⁷⁰ Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 9.

¹⁷¹ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 139.

¹⁷² Ephrem, “Nisibene Hymns 69.12,” in *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem*, trans. Sebastian Brock, 2nd ed. Studies Supplementary to Sobornost 4 (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1983), p. 78.

Baptism, then, not only transforms the likeness of humanity, but it also betroths the *ihidāyā* to the *Īhidāyā* by creating in the baptized a bridal chamber of the heart:

Your garments glisten, my brethren, as snow;
and fair is your shining in the likeness of Angels!
In the likeness of Angels, ye have come up, beloved,
from Jordan's river, in the armour of the Holy Ghost
The bridal chamber that fails not, my brethren, ye have received:
And the glory of Adam's house to-day ye have put on.¹⁷⁵

The earthly body, then, is made into a heavenly temple built by Christ:

For by baptism our Lord made new your old age –
He, the Carpenter of life, Who by His blood formed and built a
temple for His dwelling
Do not allow that old man
to dwell in the renewed temple.
O body, if you have God live in your Temple
you will also become His royal palace.¹⁷⁶

This is far from the dualistic understanding of the body and soul that was commonplace in the Egyptian desert. It is interesting to note, here, that Arthur Vööbus has characterized the mortification of the human body as a central aspect of Ephrem's asceticism:

If we give full value to these terms, it is fairly evident that the idea of mortification is fundamental to the concept of asceticism in Ephrem. Indeed, it lies at the heart of his whole ascetic outlook. All of Ephrem's arguments stem from this fundamental belief at

¹⁷³ Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity* 23.13, p. 190. See also Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 69. His translation of this stanza relates this image more clearly: "Blessed is He who descended, / put Adam on and ascended;" See also Koonammakkal, "Ephrem's Ideas on Singleness," <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Koonammakkal.html>.

¹⁷⁴ Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity* 21.4, p. 174. Ephrem calls angels "watchers" most likely in reference to their continuing vigil or state of spiritual wakefulness.

¹⁷⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany* 13.1-3, p. 283. For a discussion of Christian baptism in Ephrem and the sanctification of the Jordan River see Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, pp.90-94. See also Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, p.67 in which he notes that at His baptism Christ places the Robe of Glory in the river Jordan.

¹⁷⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 1.2, p. 262. The *Book of Steps* also characterizes the body as a temple through the transformative power of baptism. It also stresses the value of the Church in the ascetic life of an *ihidāyā*: "This church, with its altar and baptism, gives birth to men and women as children, and they suck her milk until they are weaned. Then they come to growth and to knowledge that belongs to the body and to the heart, whereupon they make their bodies temples and their hearts altars." Homily 12.3 (Brock's translation)

the core of the theological structure of asceticism. The central truth remains the same though the exposition may vary a great deal.¹⁷⁷

The implication here is that the concern or purpose of Ephrem's asceticism was for the physical transformation of the body: the subduing of the passions of the flesh. Yet, the Syrian, in his *Homily on the Sinful Woman*, affords a different role to the body, a role in which the body figures prominently in effecting one's own redemption. This homily begins with the woman, hearing that Christ "sat and was feasting in Simon's house," renouncing her past life as a prostitute, confessing her sins, and expressing her will to change.¹⁷⁸ After, fighting off her old self, the woman begins to use her body to help heal her soul:¹⁷⁹

And the tears gushed forth from her eyes over the deadly eye-paint. She drew off and cast from her hands the enticing bracelets of her youth. She put off and cast away from her body the tunic of fine linen of whoredom, and resolved to go and attire herself in the tunic, the garment of reconciliation. She drew off and cast from her feet the adorned sandals of lewdness; and directed the steps of her going in the path of the heavenly Eagle. She took up her gold in her palm and held it up to the face of heaven, and began to cry secretly, to Him who hears openly: "This, O Lord, that I have gained from iniquity, with it will I purchase to my self-redemption."¹⁸⁰

Thus, the emphasis on the very clothes and charms in which she used to entice her clients figure prominently in her own salvation. In other words, "her humanity is transformed

¹⁷⁷ Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*, vol. 2, *The Origin of Asceticism. Early Monasticism in Persia*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 197 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1960), 97-98. For the most part, Vööbus relies on the spurious works attributed to Ephrem, such as his *Testament*, in forming this position. Sebastian Brock has argued that Ephrem valued the body and that this attitude manifested itself as a central theme to his works. See Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 36-38. See also Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria," p. 221-22 for an outline of Vööbus' argument based upon disputed texts.

¹⁷⁸ Ephrem, "Homily on the Sinful Woman 1," in *Selections Translated into English from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian*, trans. John Gwynn, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, series 2, vol. 13, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1898; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), p. 336.

¹⁷⁹ Hannah Hunt, "The Tears of a Sinful Woman: a Theology of Redemption in the Homilies of St. Ephraim and his Followers," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 1:2 (July 1998): <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No2/HVIN2Hunt.html>.

¹⁸⁰ Ephrem, *Homily on the Sinful Woman* 3, p. 337. *The Homily on Our Lord* relates this same story of the sinful woman, Simon the Pharisee, and Christ, with the same emphasis on the redemptive power of the body.

through her correct use of her body.”¹⁸¹ Her new outward physical purity helps to transform the inner condition of her heart toward Christ. In fact, while Simon did not offer water to wash Christ’s feet, she bathed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Thus, the body of the sinful woman “becomes the sacrifice of a contrite heart, with the tears flowing in place of blood, and the mortified flesh and skin represented by her hair.”¹⁸²

The body, in Ephrem’s thought, is not something that is needed to be overcome or mortified. Rather, it is a key vehicle for the spiritual transformation of the soul. In fact, Ephrem understands the body and the soul as being indivisible and thus responsible and dependent upon each other both for salvation and for falling into sin:

You looked upon the body, as it mourned, and on the soul in
its grief,
for You had joined them together in love, but they had parted
and separated in pain.
The body was fashioned in wisdom, the soul was breathed
in through grace,
love was infused in perfection – but the serpent separated it
in wickedness.
Body and soul go to court to see which caused the other to sin;
but the wrong belongs to both, for free will belongs to both.¹⁸³

Furthermore, the body is not denigrated for the simple reason that it is “part of God’s creation.”¹⁸⁴ Christ put on a body at the Incarnation.¹⁸⁵ Thus, there exists, in Ephrem’s thought, a reciprocal relationship between body and soul, for while the soul needs the

¹⁸¹ Hunt, “The Tears of a Sinful Woman,” <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No2/HV1N2Hunt.html>.

¹⁸² Hunt, “The Tears of a Sinful Woman,” <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No2/HV1N2Hunt.html>.

¹⁸³ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 69:3-5, p. 77. (Brock’s translation)

¹⁸⁴ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 36.

¹⁸⁵ For a description of Christ putting on humanity, that is to say a body, see *Hymns on the Fast* 3.6; complete hymn translated by Brock in *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 166; *Hymns on the Nativity* 9.2, p. 125. Brock also cites an interesting passage from the *Hymns Against Heresies* which argues for the worth of the body on the basis of the Eucharist. See Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 39.

body to hear and live, the body needs the soul to animate and give it voice.¹⁸⁶ This relationship is expressed differently in terms of what happens at baptism:

Body and soul baptized together
Body and soul together exalt You,
for they have been baptized in You
and have put you on.¹⁸⁷

Furthermore:

The body gives thanks to You
because You created it as an abode for Yourself,
the soul worships You
because You betrothed it at Your coming.¹⁸⁸

Thus, as a result of sharing in the consecration of baptism, the body provides the chamber in which the soul meets the bridegroom:¹⁸⁹

The soul is Your bridal chamber,
Your guests are the senses and the thoughts.
And if a single-body is a wedding-feast for You,
how great is Your banquet for the whole church!¹⁹⁰

In other words, Ephrem values both the body and soul for their different functions in the economy of salvation. It is not until the Resurrection that these purified, disembodied, souls, which wait just outside the boundary of Paradise, are finally united with the body. In Ephrem's system the body enters Paradise as well, reemphasizing the value he places in it.¹⁹¹

Moreover, the Syrian expresses this baptismal union of the soul to the heavenly bridegroom in a different way: by introducing the concept of the circumcision, not of the

¹⁸⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 8.4; 8.8.

¹⁸⁷ Hymns against Heresies, 17.5 as quoted in Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 93.

¹⁸⁸ Hymns against Heresies, 17.5 as quoted in Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 38. For Christ as the Bridegroom of souls see also *Hymns on Virginity* 25.16, p. 374.

¹⁸⁹ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 36; 127. In *Hymns on Virginity* 25.16, Ephrem notes that Christ came to espouse souls.

¹⁹⁰ Ephrem, "Hymns of Faith 14.5," in *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem*, trans. Sebastian Brock, 2nd ed. Studies Supplementary to Sobornost 4 (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1983), p. 19.

¹⁹¹ This is the predominant theme of *Hymns on Paradise* 8.

flesh, but of the heart.¹⁹² And it is this circumcision that creates the bridal chamber for the *Īhīdāyā*:

He whose body is circumcised but whose heart is uncircumcised
 is circumcised outwardly but uncircumcised in secret
 But he whose heart is circumcised but whose flesh is uncircumcised
 is circumcised for the Spirit but uncircumcised for the eye.
 In the name of his circumcision the circumcised fornicates.
 With the cup of purity he drinks mire.
 By a circumcised heart the uncircumcised becomes holy [chaste].
 In the bridal chamber of his heart dwells his Creator.¹⁹³

Furthering this inner/outer motif, of body and soul, of heart and flesh, is Ephrem's emphasis on the internal practice of prayer and the external display of faith. In fact, it is through the ascetic virtues of prayer and faith that an *īhīdāyā* is able to focus on the inner chamber and become united with the *Īhīdāyā*: "Let prayer wipe clean the murky thoughts, let faith wipe clean the senses outwardly; and let one such man who is divided collect himself and become one before You."¹⁹⁴ In this regard, then, "both prayer and faith are betrothed brides, but they have different roles: one lives in doors, the other out of doors."¹⁹⁵

Thus, as Brock notes, Ephrem not only characterizes the body as location of the bridal chamber, but he also internalizes this concept by situating this chamber in the heart, "the very center of the human person."¹⁹⁶ In other words, the heart is the emotional and intellectual seat of an individual. Thus, like the relation between the body and soul,

¹⁹² Murray, "The Exhortation to Candidates," 67. See also *Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany* 3.4; 3.12; 3.13; 3.25.

¹⁹³ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 44.17-20, pp. 444-45. Ephrem, in *Hymns on Virginity* 49:1, connects the importance this circumcision of the heart to the Incarnation: "The High One sent a circumcised healer / to circumcise the heart of the uncircumcised people."

¹⁹⁴ Ephrem, "Hymns on Faith 20.17" in *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, trans. Sebastian Brock, Cistercian Studies Series 101 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. 35. *Armenian Hymns* 1.3, in this same collection of hymns, also relates how prayer and faith foster singleness of mind.

¹⁹⁵ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 129.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

Ephrem does not posit a dualism between the mind and the heart, which was very much characteristic of the Greek philosophical tradition.¹⁹⁷ Interestingly enough, Ephrem characterizes the mind as something spiritual, that is to say the soul.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, he argues that at the Resurrection the body comes to resemble the mind/soul.¹⁹⁹ In fact, “at the end / the body will put on / the beauty of the soul, / the soul will put on that of the spirit, / while the spirit will put on the very likeness of God’s majesty.”²⁰⁰ Thus this reunion of the body and soul in Christ and their entry into Paradise, for Ephrem, all derive from the process begun by baptism.

IV.III – Marriage and Virginity

Does Ephrem’s emphasis, here, on the theme of the spiritual marriage to Christ, created through baptism, indicate that he disparaged earthly marriage? In many instances throughout his hymns and homilies, Ephrem talks of the virgin as being solitary or of a single-nature, that is to say not only ‘single’ in terms of marital status, but with the single focus of living a life in imitation of Christ in their hearts and minds:

or if any has lived
a life of virginity,
him too they welcome into their bosom,
for the solitary such as he
has never lain in any bosom
nor upon any marriage bed.²⁰¹

In other words, it appears that earthly marriage had no place because the relationship between the betrothed and the heavenly Bridegroom was one of absolute devotion. The bodies of virgins are temples in which Christ lives: “With awe and tenderness the youth honored / the Temple in which you dwelt, to teach us / that today the King’s Son dwells /

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 128.

¹⁹⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 6.2, p. 109.

¹⁹⁹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 5.8, p. 105.

²⁰⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 9.20, p. 143.

²⁰¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 7.18, p. 125.

in holy virgins.”²⁰² In fact, those virgins who have not shared a marriage bed are given a radiant marriage chamber shared with Christ.²⁰³ This sentiment is repeated in the Hymns on Virginit

Blessed are you, O bride espoused to the Living One,
 You who do not long for a mortal man.
 Foolish is the bride who is proud
 of the ephemeral crown that will be gone tomorrow.
 Blessed is your heart, captivated by the love
 of a beauty portrayed in your mind.
 You have exchanged the transitory bridal couch for the bridal couch
 whose blessings are unceasing.²⁰⁴

In furthering this image of the “ephemeral crown,” Ephrem associates childbirth with the notion of allowing oneself to succumb to the joys and pleasures of unholiness:

Blessed are you, O castle, castle of the King,
 whose gate is greater than mortal beings.
 The glorious King dwelt within you.
 Let His love be a bulwark for your beauty.
 Your womb escaped the pangs of the curse.
 By the serpent the pains of the female entered.
 Let the defiled one be put to shame, seeing that
 his pangs were not in your womb.²⁰⁵

Ephrem continues his praise of the virginal life as the ideal by contrasting the ephemeral or transitory crown of marriage with the everlasting beauty that exists only in remaining chaste for Christ the eternal bridegroom:

Blessed are you who have abstained,
 for merry is the beginning, morose the end of this life.
 It begins joyfully as an adventure;
 it ends mournfully as a deception.
 Blessed is your heart that hated the word
 that, while beginning, has passed away and ceased to exist.
 Beauty blossoms for the foolish woman and makes her proud,
 but it fades and makes her downcast.²⁰⁶

²⁰² Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginit* 25.10, pp. 372-73. See also *Hymns on Virginit* 24.8,10,11; *Hymns on the Nativity* 17.5, pp. 154-55.

²⁰³ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 7.15, p. 124.

²⁰⁴ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginit* 24.5, p. 366.

²⁰⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginit* 24.11, p. 368.

²⁰⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginit* 24.12, p. 368. See *Hymns on Virginit* 3.1-7 for Ephrem’s warning on the fleeting nature of beauty and of the dangers of sexual temptation.

In this regard, then, virginity is viewed as a pearl given at great cost and sacrifice as a wedding gift to Christ:

He loved and cherished the chaste youth
in whom was hidden the pearl.
O virginity, He came down and lifted you up;
before the Watchers, upon his breast He exalted you.
Without effort the Watchers gave the gift,
but by struggle you gave it.²⁰⁷

Virgins, then, become like angels who have also given the pearl to Christ. In other words, for Ephrem the celibate life was the angelic life.

However, the pearl not only represents virginity, but it also is a symbol of Christ and works as an analogy for the Incarnation:

Your mother is the virgin bride of the sea
- without its having married her; she fell into its bosom
- without its being aware; she conceived you in it
- though it knew her not. Your symbol
rebukes the Jewish girls when they wear you.²⁰⁸

Thus, one's possession of the pearl is not only indicative of one's ascetic virtue of virginity, but also of one's devotion to Christ the *Īhīdāyā*:

In symbol and in truth Leviathan is trodden down
by mortals: the baptized, like divers strip
and put on oil, as a symbol of Christ
they snatched you and came up: stripped
they seized the soul from his embittered mouth.²⁰⁹

In this regard, the diver or the baptized person is able to regain the pearl. In other words, given that the pearl, for Ephrem, is both a symbol of virginity and of Christ, it necessarily follows that upon baptism one reemerges having regained virginity and the Robe of Glory, that is to say the angelic life in imitation of Christ. Again, this is reminiscent of

²⁰⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 15.4, pp. 326-27. For virginity as a pearl see also *Hymns on Virginity* 2.4-5, p. 267.

²⁰⁸ Ephrem, "Hymns on Faith 82.2," in *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem*, trans. Sebastian Brock, 2nd ed. Studies Supplementary to Sobornost 4 (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1983), p. 32.

²⁰⁹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith* 82.10, p. 33.

Aphrahat's understanding of baptism as the regaining of the paradisiacal state of Adam. In terms of the tension between marriage and virginity, then, it would follow from this that the regaining of one's virginity and a life in imitation of Christ, whether one is married or not, would only require a commitment of celibacy upon the part of the devotee. Thus, although Ephrem shares with Aphrahat his preference toward the state of permanent virginity, the Syrian does not translate this into a disdain of earthly marriage. Rather, what Ephrem here is emphasizing is chastity among virgins and married believers. This is evident in the final stanzas of the second *Hymn on Virginity* in which he offers an exhortation to women to preserve their chastity in the biblical examples of Jephthah's daughter and Susanna:

Chaste women, do not complete your course in the trackless waste
of desires,
lest your enemy then work in you, take your power and discharge
your wellspring.
lest your old age come to shame,
lest your hateful way of life be reproached.
Your way of life made light of youth in the contest,
so that the crown might adorn your old age.
For when one ages and becomes ugly, the chaste ways of youth
come to mind;
they abhor his old age because of its infirmity,
but they cherish the infirmities of the body
who see that the adornments of the spirit are hidden in the soul.
O virginity, portray with your senses your glories
that you might be honored by them when you are old.
Let chastity be portrayed in your eyes and in your ears the sound of
truth.
Imprint your tongue with the word of life and upon your hands
[imprint] all alms.
Stamp your footsteps with visiting the sick,
and let the image of your Lord be portrayed in your heart.
Tablets are honored because of the image of kings.
How much [more will] one [be honored] who portrayed his Lord in
all his senses.²¹⁰

The clearest example of this praise of chastity in marriage comes in Ephrem's comment on the Samaritan woman at the well in his *Hymns on Virginity*:

²¹⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 2.13-15, pp. 269-70.

Blessed are you, woman, because you saw
 that your husbands were dead, and your reproaches were many.
 Other men were afraid to take you [in marriage],
 lest they, like their counterparts die.
 You took a pretended and bribed husband
 to set aside your reproach but not to approach your body.
 The contract and the oaths that you made secretly
 He revealed to you, and you believed in Him.²¹¹

The secret, of course, was that the woman had remained celibate in her marriage. Thus, despite the accusations of being a harlot, her celibacy becomes evident in her testing the sign of living water: "Blessed is your perception that you disputed with your Lord. / Your dispute shows that your heart was not contemptible. / If you had been a harlot, your silence would have offered tears / to the one who gives life to all."²¹² In this regard, then, having her secret revealed by Christ she drinks the living water, that is to say, she is baptized, and becomes a spiritual bride of Christ: "she left the mortal man and did not seek his protection, / for the Living One espoused her."²¹³

Furthermore, while it is obvious that Ephrem favoured virginity over marriage, this preference did not translate into an understanding that the married were unrighteous or would be excluded from Paradise. As Peter Brown argues, Ephrem is aware of the "elemental paradox of late antique Christianity: an 'angelic,' ascetic way of life depended, for its very existence, on the wild rootstock of intercourse and childbearing."²¹⁴ In this regard, then, in the *Hymns on Paradise*, the Syrian acknowledges the reward of the marriage life in Heaven:

There the married state
 finds rest after having been anguished
 by the pangs of giving birth, brought on by the curse,
 and by the pain of childbearing;
 now it sees the children

²¹¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 22.4, p. 356.

²¹² Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 22.5, p. 356.

²¹³ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 22.12, p. 358.

²¹⁴ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 329-30.

whom it had buried amid laments,
 pasturing like lambs
 in Eden;
 exalted in their ranks,
 glorious in their splendors,
 they are like kindred
 of the spotless angels.²¹⁵

Elsewhere, Ephrem further restores marriage by claiming that it shares in the angelic life with virgins and celibates:

The Evil One stole the weak from marriage in the name of
 conversion,
 and when they were in the midst, he placed behind them the
 disgrace of the offense,
 and before them he again placed beauty
 that is a snare of hateful desire.
 Ashamed to assume the condition of marriage,
 they fell into the snares of sin
 O body, why do you persecute virginity that came down to earth
 and lives with us as a sojourner; if one pursues her and uproots her
 nest,
 because she is not able to rebuild it,
 her wing quickly carries her to the height –
 this bird on high who grows old in one nest –
 but if she departs, she leaves [the nest] forever.
 When the dear friend of Watchers takes flight, the companion of
 demons enters:
 desire, which is the hatred of virginity pursued by Joseph.
 For Virginity loved the Watchers;
 she flees to ascend the height of the Watchers.
 Who will not weep because of instead of this quiet one,
 this inflamed one entered and lived there?²¹⁶

As Kathleen McVey notes, Ephrem, in this “anti-encratite section,” is arguing against the position of some Christians who forbade marriage entirely.²¹⁷ In this hymn, Ephrem praises the condition of marriage for producing and protecting virgins. To use Brown’s words, “marriage was the mother of virginity...[and] the married had a share in the rewards of the ‘angelic’ life.”²¹⁸ As we have seen, this is reflected in the *Letter to Publius*, where Ephrem relays his vision of virgins being turned away from the gates of

²¹⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 7.8, pp. 121-22.

²¹⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 1.6-8, p. 263. See also *Hymns on Virginity* 24.1 for the image of chastity as a bird in a nest.

²¹⁷ McVey, “footnote 9” in *Hymns on Virginity* 1, p. 263.

²¹⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 330.

heaven because their virginity was not adorned with meritorious virtue. Thus, the reward of the angelic life, that is to say Paradise, is not limited to virgins. This is where Ephrem can be seen as deviating slightly from the literary milieu he shared with Aphrahat and the author of the *Book of Steps*. However, this is not to say that his contemporaries maintained that those living in marriage will not attain the rewards of heaven. It is simply that they do not emphasize or discuss the specifics of this to the degree accomplished by the Syrian. The concern here is for chastity within marriage; a concern, as we have already seen, shared with Aphrahat and the Book of Steps in their respective warnings to their communities. Thus, the married who were virtuous in body, that is to say chaste, and in spirit, through good deeds, were allowed to enter the gates of Paradise.²¹⁹ The life of virginity, or continence in marriage, then, was a celestial sojourner or “dear friend” of the watchers.

IV.IV – Obstacles to the Ascetic Ideal and Other Ascetical Themes

So far, we have seen that the ascetic ideal of Ephrem is intimately tied to the notion of Christ the *Īhīdāyā*, and to the themes of the Church, baptism, the body, virginity, and (spiritual) marriage. What, then, are some of the obstacles Ephrem understood as standing in the way of one living a life in complete imitation of Christ?

On a number of occasions, Ephrem stresses the need to approach God with an open heart and mind. In fact, he argues that God is a complete mystery and thereby inconceivable to the human mind: “Glory to that Hidden One Who even to the mind / is

²¹⁹ It is interesting to note that in *On Admonition and Repentance*, a homily wrongly attributed to Ephrem, the author captures this very sentiment: “Chastity befits the wife; purity is as her adornment; law becomes the husband; justice is the crown for his head. Desire not thou the bed of thy neighbour lest another desire thy bed. Preserve purity in thy marriage, that thy marriage may be holy.” *On Admonition and Repentance*, in *Selections Translated into English from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian*, trans. John Gwynn, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, series 2, vol. 13, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1898; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), p. 332.

utterly imperceptible to those who investigate Him.”²²⁰ However, as the Syrian points out, in a polemic against the philosophy of Arius, many Christians have taken an attitude of intellectual arrogance when approaching Christ:

Christ, You have given life to the creation by Your birth
that took place openly from a womb of flesh.
Christ, you dazzled understanding by Your birth
that shone forth from eternity from the hidden womb.
I am amazed by You in two [ways]: The wandering find life in You,
but investigators go astray in You.²²¹

To this, then, Ephrem emphasizes the importance of recognizing Christ as the messiah and thus the way to everlasting life: “A human being needs to live. Come let us live not die / in the depth of investigation.”²²² In other words, religious truth, that is to say knowledge of the mysteries of God, cannot be found through the means of human rationalism or intellectual investigation/theologizing.²²³ However, this does not mean that nothing can be known of God.²²⁴ In fact, God has chosen to cross the “ontological chasm” or gap that separates Him from Creation, thereby initiating humanity’s limited capacity to learn something of Him.²²⁵ In this regard, a prominent set of themes which run throughout Ephrem’s work are the three primary revelations of God: the symbols and

²²⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity* 3.5, p. 83-4.

²²¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 31.1, pp. 398-99.

²²² Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 16.5, p. 330.

²²³ Siney Griffith “A Spiritual Father for the Whole Church: the Universal Appeal of St. Ephraim the Syrian.” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 1:2 (July 1998): <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No2/HVIN2Griffith.html>; see also Griffith, “Ephraem, the Deacon of Edessa,” 43-47 for a discussion on the *Hymns of Faith* as an attack against the academic/philosophical discourse of the Arians, who blasphemously believed that the human mind could understand the nature of God.

²²⁴ Nor does it mean that Ephrem did not engage in theological investigation. However, as Brock notes, Ephrem’s approach did not involve an attempt to define the indefinable, that is to say God. Rather, through the use of paradox and symbol Ephrem creates a dynamic theological perspective, in which meaning is entirely subjective. See Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 24.

²²⁵ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 40; Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 41; See also *Hymns on Paradise* 1.3 which notes humanity’s limited ability to know God.

types present in Scripture and Nature; the metaphors used in Scripture to describe God; and the Incarnation:²²⁶

In every place, if you look, His symbol is there,
and when you read, you find His types.
For by Him were created all creatures,
And he engraved His symbols upon His possessions.
When He created the world,
He gazed at it and adorned it with His images.
Streams of His symbols opened, flowed and poured forth
His symbols on His members.²²⁷

Yet, while humanity can only describe the celestial using terrestrial terms and language, Ephrem is quick to warn against a literal reading of these symbols, metaphors, and types.²²⁸ Such an investigation is only misleading and, as Brock notes, leads to an abuse of "God's great condescension in revealing to us, through Scripture, something of Paradise's beauty and wonders."²²⁹

If someone concentrates his attention solely
on the metaphors used of God's majesty,
he abuses and misrepresents that majesty
and thus errs
by means of those metaphors
with which God clothed Himself for his benefit,
and he is ungrateful to that Grace
which stooped low
to the level of his childishness;
although it has nothing in common with him,
yet Grace clothed itself in his likeness
in order to bring him to the likeness of itself.²³⁰

While Ephrem's philosophical understanding of symbols, types, and metaphors is important to the way in which he pursues theological enquiry, what is important for this thesis is the manner in which the Syrian proposes the overcoming of such an attitude that defeats the goal of an *ihidāyā*.

²²⁶ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 41.

²²⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 20.12, pp. 348-49.

²²⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 11.4, p. 155.

²²⁹ Brock, *The Hymns on Paradise*, 153.

²³⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 11.6, p. 156.

Ephrem outlines a number of ascetic virtues which keep one's life in imitation of Christ, and create an "eye of the mind" that is entirely focused towards Heaven.²³¹ For Ephrem, the eye acts like a mirror and reflects the condition of one's soul. We saw this symbol at work in our earlier discussion on marriage and virginity: "Let chastity be portrayed in your eyes and in your ears the sound of truth."²³² Likewise, in the *Letter to Publius*: "You would do well not to let fall from you hands the polished mirror of the holy Gospel of your Lord, which reproduces the image of everyone who gazes at it and the likeness of everyone who peers in it."²³³ Thus, to have a luminous eye, as Brock explains, is to have a lucid and clear focus on Christ.²³⁴ Furthermore, Ephrem notes that it is our responsibility to maintain the clarity of the mirror: "If our mirror be darkness, / it is altogether joy to be hateful; / because their blemishes are not reprov'd: / but if polished and shining, / it is our freedom that is adorned."²³⁵ The freedom Ephrem speaks of is from the bondage of sin, and is a freedom which is attained through living the angelic life in Christ.

For Ephrem, the "eye of the mind," that is to say the spiritual perception that functions by means of one's faith, is fostered by the traditional ascetic practice of perpetual sorrow and mourning.²³⁶ In fact, the Syrian sees the mourners achieving the reward of Paradise:

Bear up, O life of mourning,
so that you may attain to Paradise
its dew will wash off your squalor,
while what it exudes will render you fragrant;

²³¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 1.4, p. 78.

²³² Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 2.15, p. 270.

²³³ Ephrem, *Letter to Publius* 1.1, p. 338. See also *Hymns on Virginity* 23.6: "Your word, O woman, became a mirror / in which He might see your hidden heart."

²³⁴ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 71

²³⁵ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 16.4, p. 185.

²³⁶ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 71.

its support will afford rest after your toil,
 its crown will give you comfort,
 it will proffer you fruits
 in your hunger,
 fruits that purify those who partake of them;
 in your thirst
 it will provide for you a celestial draught,
 one that makes wise those who drink of it.²³⁷

Griffith has noted that 'mourner' for Ephrem suggests a "penitent ascetic with a penchant for living alone for a time in the desert."²³⁸ In this regard, then, the spiritual hunger and the squalor of sin in this stanza are analogous to what an anchorite would physically experience in a desert environment. However, as he later notes, the mourner, for Ephrem, "had nothing to do with anchoritic monks, and everything to do with the expression of ascetic penitence."²³⁹ This becomes evident when the Syrian compares the city of Ephrem, where in the Gospel of John Jesus stays before returning to Jerusalem, to the desert: "[Ephrem's] desert is the symbol of the desert of the world, / for it gave peace to the One Who gives peace to all."²⁴⁰ Likewise: "In you [God] portrays a type for the ascetics [mourners] who love / the all-liberating desert."²⁴¹ Thus, the tears of mourning become not only an expression of an inner desire for repentance, but they also anticipate the day when one receives the reward of the angelic life in Paradise:

This day of separation,
 which to us seems to cut off all hope,
 only increases their hope,
 now that they are returning to their own city:
 lamentation for those below,
 but joy for those above;
 the world below sorrows at the loss
 of their familiar voices,
 but the heaven above is overjoyed
 that their song is now intermingled with the song of the seraphs.
 Blessed is the man who weeps over himself,

²³⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 7.3, pp. 119-20.

²³⁸ Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria," 235.

²³⁹ Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria," 235.

²⁴⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 21.1, p. 351; John 11:54.

²⁴¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 21.2, p. 351.

rather than for the departed.²⁴²

As we shall later see, Ephrem wept for the opportunity to enter the gates of Heaven. For now, it is enough to note that tears also work to cleanse the body of sin. This was evident in our earlier examination of the sinful woman in the *Homily on the Sinful Woman* and the *Homily on Our Lord*:

Our Lord was not hungry for the Pharisee's refreshments; He hungered for the tears of the sinful woman. Once He had been filled and refreshed by the tears He hungered for, He then chastised the one who had invited Him for food that perishes, in order to show that He had been invited not to nourish the body but to assist the mind [soul].²⁴³

This sentiment is further captured in the *Hymns on Virginity*: "Insofar as tears are found in our eyes, / we will blot out with our tears the letter of bondage of our sins."²⁴⁴ This is similar to the eighteenth homily, "On the Tears of Prayer," in the *Book of Steps*, which speaks of tears as representing both a desire for repentance and also as signaling delivery from sin:

It is the same with people who sin and so are distanced from our Lord and his righteousness: they weep with sorrow, just as someone weeps when he is far from his friend and feels sorrow concerning him. Such people feel sorrow for their sins, since they fear the judgement of our Lord, and they weep so that God may have compassion on them and forgive them.

If they then turn away from their sins and are justified, they can draw close to our Lord and their tears turn to ones of joy. And when they become without sins and are delivered from sin, they weep with joy as they encounter the Lord...²⁴⁵

Besides mourning, Ephrem also emphasizes the importance of fasting to living a life in imitation of Christ.²⁴⁶ As he explains in one hymn, Christ is the example to his disciples of how fasting can defeat the Devil's temptations:

Our Lord labored and went out to the contest

²⁴² Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 13.16, pp. 174-75.

²⁴³ Ephrem, "Homily on Our Lord," in *St. Ephrem the Syrian. Selected Prose Works*, trans. Matthews, E.G. and J.P. Amar. Fathers of the Church 91, ed. Kathleen McVey (Washington: Catholic University Press of America, 1994), Homily 15, p. 289-90.

²⁴⁴ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 46.12, p. 450.

²⁴⁵ *Book of Steps*, 18.2, p.55. (Brock's translation)

²⁴⁶ For a discussion of the importance of fasting in the *Book of Steps*, see Corbett, "They do not Take Wives," 12.

not to use force
 but to be victorious in conflict.
 Therefore, he hungered, and by fasting he conquered
 that one who is justified by eating.
 The evil one saw an opportunity in [His] hunger;
 he demanded that He make stones into bread.
 [Satan] became a stone among stones;
 His heart trembled when he saw that He was a craftsman
 and [yet] He defeated him in a debate.
 This [thought] came upon the evil one,
 "If He is divine and He is hungry,
 how will he regard me if I say,
 'Make the stones bread and be nourished'?"
 Why will he bear the burden of his hunger?"
 Blind was the evil one in his pride and his question,
 For if He were God, as he said,
 it escaped his notice that God does not hunger.
 He approached to make [Him] err, but erred himself,
 For he did not discern what he said.²⁴⁷

The implication, here, for Ephrem's ascetic ideal is that food is of little or no importance to the angelic life. Sustenance, instead, comes from the beauty of being near to Christ.²⁴⁸ In other words, "for that which is spiritual," which, as we have seen, is the baptized body and soul, "has the Spirit's breath as its nourishment."²⁴⁹ Hence the importance of fasting in directing one's focus towards Heaven, and also in the daily struggle of individuals against the temptations of Satan:

All temptations surround the tempter of all
 who dared to tempt You.
 Fasts and ... are his great downfall:
 With long fasts youths rack him:
 Anchorites surround him and tear him to bits;
 apostles torment him with their bones.
 Bound with prayers, he is cast
 into Gehenna before Gehenna's time.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 12.1-4, pp. 310-11. *Hymns on Paradise* 12.7 talks of how Satan tempted Christ by "clothing himself with a Psalm."

²⁴⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 9.29, p. 147.

²⁴⁹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 9.9, p. 139.

²⁵⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 13.1, p. 317.

This portrayal of ascetics attacking Satan through their fasting is continued two stanza's later. Symbolically, the Devil assumes the image of an emaciated hermit, wasting away in the fires of Hell, when one becomes passionless and deaf to his temptations:

Afflicted with a great thirst is he who gave You
a reed with gall to drink.
He recalls his cakes and libations,
he who became fat and burst from corpulence.
He sees the captive departing;
he sees his life diminishing.
Abstainers from wine diminish his abundance,
and he approaches extinction.
Accursed is he! If someone abstains from meat,
[the Devil's] own flesh wastes away until he makes him stumble,
His blood too, is drained when he is unable
to douse the faster with wine.
If he does not see our passion inflamed,
in an oven he is tormented and burned.
In a great stove [he is burned]
if he sees human desires tamed.²⁵¹

Mathews notes how this ascetic virtue of fasting did not function in Ephrem's thought the same way it did for Desert Fathers or Anthony the Great: "As he praised Vologeses...so did Ephrem praise the virtues of prayer and fasting within the church community as portrayed in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. In fact, the life of the Christian community depicted by Ephrem was one of communal life much like that depicted in those same Gospels and Acts. Ephrem's own life, in so far as we know it, bespeaks evangelical and not any anchoritic practices or concerns."²⁵²

Thus, for Ephrem, the proper attitude for a Christian did not involve philosophical enquiry into the nature of God; rather, his focus was on experiencing a union with Christ. For Ephrem, mourning and fasting were tools for the ascetic to help refocus and redirect their heart towards Heaven. These are only two of many physical expressions of asceticism in his works.

²⁵¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 13.3-4, p. 317-18.

²⁵² Mathews, "The Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian," 31.

IV.V – Ephrem on Ephrem

There are few autobiographical details or descriptions that can be gleaned from the works of Ephrem. This is especially true in regard to any specific references Ephrem makes to his own spirituality. As we have noted, he referred to himself as God's harp,²⁵³ and perhaps this offers a beginning point in understanding how Ephrem saw himself in light of his own ascetic standard or ideal.

In the *Hymns on Virginity*, Ephrem identifies himself as one who qualifies for the rewards of Paradise. This is made on the basis of his observance of the Ten Commandments, knowledge that comes from the three harps of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Nature, and of his [Nicene] orthodoxy concerning the true nature of Christ as being *agennetos* (unbegotten or ingenerate) and of one essence with the Father.²⁵⁴ However, and most important to this thesis, Ephrem makes a second reference to his own baptism:²⁵⁵

I, who have believed that they are as one
and also from One and by means of One,
I have honored Moses, I have worshipped the Son
and I have professed that nature is pure.
You have baptized me in the faithful names,
and you have handed me the glorious harps.
By then I have been made worthy of your coming, O Bridegroom,
You who have been revealed ...²⁵⁶

Ephrem even refers to Christ as his bridegroom to whom he was betrothed at baptism.

Thus, perhaps one can infer from these references that Ephrem believed he was living a life in imitation of Christ the *Îhîdāyâ*.

²⁵³ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 17.8, p. 187.

²⁵⁴ This can also be understood as a statement against the heterodox philosophies of Arius concerning the nature of Christ. This is a prominent concern in the writings of Ephrem, and is well displayed in *The Homily On Our Lord*. The theme of the three harps is developed in *Hymns on Virginity* 28-30, pp. 385-97.

²⁵⁵ The first reference, as already stated, was in *Hymns against Heresies* 3.13. See above note 20.

²⁵⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 27.5, pp. 383-84.

Interestingly enough, Ephrem, in the *Hymns on Paradise*, describes himself as having crossed the ontological gap which separates humanity from God through the reading of Scripture. This is to say that he has received the earthly rewards of Paradise, the angelic life:

I was in wonder as I crossed
the borders of Paradise
at how well-being, as though a companion,
turned round and remained behind.
And when I reached the shore of earth,
the mother of all thorns
I encountered all kinds
of pain and suffering.
I learned how, compared to Paradise,
our abode is but a dungeon;
yet the prisoners within it
weep when they leave it!²⁵⁷

Not only is this a testament to Ephrem's philosophical understanding of the power of Scripture to reveal the mysteries of God, but this stanza also alludes to the Syrian's understanding that he has achieved, or at least experienced, Adam's paradisiacal or angelic state. Ephrem is able to clearly contrast the rewards of Paradise with the torments of the earthly life. This difference is no longer hidden from him, for through his luminous eye of the mind he is able to perceive his own divine reality. Earlier in the *Hymns of Paradise*, Ephrem describes how one must read the Biblical accounts of Paradise not necessarily literally, but with "awe and love." "I revered what lay hidden / and meditated on what was revealed."²⁵⁸ Thus, "with the eye of the mind / I gazed upon Paradise."²⁵⁹ Ephrem, then, understood himself as possessing a clarity of vision that only came from living in imitation of Christ.

²⁵⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 5.13, pp. 106-07.

²⁵⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 1.2, p. 78.

²⁵⁹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 1.4, p. 78.

Finally, Ephrem makes a reference to possessing the tears of mourning in his request of Christ for entrance into Paradise. As we have already seen, the gift of tears was understood as being symbolic of repentance and works to clean the “eye of the mind.” In this extended passage from the *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem emphasizes that he is more worthy than those demons who in Mark 5:10-12 made a request of Christ to have his request granted and enter Paradise:²⁶⁰

Encouraged by the words
I had heard,
I knelt down and wept there,
and spoke before our Lord;
“Legion received his request from You
without any tears;
permit me, with my tears,
to make my request,
grant me to enter, instead of that herd,
the Garden
so that in Paradise I may sing
of its Planter’s compassion.”²⁶¹

Ephrem continues his prayer to Christ by evoking the fall and redemption of Adam, and his shedding of his earthy clothes of leaves and assuming the Robe of Glory:

Because Adam touched the Tree
he had to run to the fig;
he became like the fig tree,
being clothed in its vesture:
Adam, like some tree,
blossomed with leaves
Then he came to that glorious
tree of the Cross,
put on glory from it,
acquired radiance from it,
heard from it the truth
that he would return to Eden once more.²⁶²

Considering this passage in combination with his earlier appeal to enter Paradise, one could possibly infer that Ephrem has associated his spiritual journey with that of Adam.

²⁶⁰ “He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” NRSV

²⁶¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 12.9, pp. 163-64.

²⁶² Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 12.10, p. 164.

The Syrian, like Adam, was shrouded and clothed in its vestures. However, having cleansed himself through tears, baptism and the other requirements of an *ihîdāyâ*, Ephrem has put on the heavenly robe and become like Christ the *Îhîdāyâ*.

As we have seen, the ascetic ideal of Ephrem centers on the notion of the *ihîdāyâ*, a follower and imitator of Christ, whose “heart is single and not divided; he is single as Adam was single when he was created; he is single in the sense of celibate.”²⁶³ In other words, the restoration of the paradisiacal state shared by Adam and Christ was seen as the ascetic ideal and goal: “The singleness of God, the singleness of Christ and the singleness of Adam in Paradise were thought of as combined in one ideal goal.”²⁶⁴ The importance of the church and its community, of baptism, and of living a virtuous and chaste life whether virgin or married to achieving this goal offers a different model of ascetic practice and behaviour than that of Anthony the Great or even Palladius’ characterization of the Syrian. Ephrem’s asceticism does not occur in the desert, or in a cell where one struggles against the demonic attacks that tempt and threaten the virtuous life. Rather, the setting is entirely ecclesiastical, as we have seen with the stress on the role of the bishops as shepherds, a type of Christ, who guard and transmit the Truth that has been imparted in the Church. On a number of occasions, Ephrem show this pastoral activity and concern as he attempts to guide the earthly *ihîdāye* toward a perfect life imitation and undivided commitment to the heavenly *Îhîdāyâ*.

²⁶³ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 139.

²⁶⁴ Koonammakkal, “Ephrem’s Ideas on Singleness,” <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Koonammakkal.html>; see also Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 31-32.

V. Conclusion

Ephrem the Syrian was not a monk, nor was his asceticism based upon the renunciation of everything earthly. The proto-monastic tradition of fourth-century Syria was not the same as the eremitism practiced by Anthony the Great in the Egyptian deserts. Yet, this is the anachronistic image of Ephrem that has come down in history, of a monk writing hymns to the Lord in his cell. This is how the ancient Greek historians Palladius and Sozomen saw the “harp of the Spirit,” and even the modern-day historian Arthur Vööbus understood the mortification of the body as central to Ephrem’s ascetic ideal. Even his own Syriac literary tradition, exemplified by the *Testament of Ephrem* and the anonymous sixth-century Syriac *vita*, characterized him in the mould of Anthony.

If Ephrem was not a monk, what did his ascetic ideal look like and how did it manifest itself in his hymns and homilies? The hermeneutical key to understanding Ephrem’s ascetic ideal lies in the concept of the *ihîdāyâ*, that is to say a ‘single’ or ‘celibate’ person living a life in full imitation of Christ. As we have seen, this ideal manifests itself in the writings of Ephrem in the traditional ascetic themes of the Church, marriage and virginity, baptism, and even fasting and mourning. The goal of the Christian was to regain the paradisiacal state of Adam, that is to say the attainment of the angelic life. This was only accomplished by an *ihîdāyâ* by living a life in complete imitation of the *Îhîdāyâ*. Thus, not only does his concern for the perfect life in Christ reveal his ascetic ideal, but it also connects Ephrem to a Syrian proto-monastic tradition he shared with Aphrahat and the anonymous author of the *Book of Steps*.

This thesis began with a brief introduction of how the history of Syrian asceticism and monasticism has been traditionally viewed and understood. The second chapter dealt

with the historical contexts of Ephrem, and the two very different lives that emerge from the details of his own writings and those of later Byzantine historians. In this regard, then, this section offered an outline of how the ascetic ideal and image of Ephrem came to resemble the eremitic model of Anthony the Great. This was due, in large part, to Palladius' characterization of the Syrian in his *Lausiac History*, and furthered by Sozomen *Ecclesiastical History* and the anonymous sixth-century *vita*. The purpose of this chapter, then, was to compare this anachronistic image of Ephrem as an anchoritic monk to the image of a deacon that emerges in his own hymns and homilies. In the third chapter, we examined the fourth-century Syrian proto-monastic literary context Ephrem shared with Aphrahat and the author of the *Book of Steps*. This examination displayed the differences between this native Syrian ascetic tradition and the Egyptian model that would later come to dominate Syriac literature. In the fourth chapter, we turned our attention toward Ephrem's own literature and the manner in which it displays his ascetic ideal. Here we focused on a number of important themes, such as church and community, baptism, marriage, and virginity, and their importance in living a life in full imitation of Christ. This section also examined those passages in his hymns and homilies in which Ephrem specifically measures himself against his own ascetic ideal.

While one can say with confidence that the Syrian's ascetic ideal centered on this notion of total discipleship, it is in fact quite difficult to locate and identify those specific ascetic qualities in the hymns and homilies of Ephrem. For the most part, this is because his use of symbols, metaphors, and types are so intertwined with other images that every image he evokes appears to have a multifold of meanings. In other words, there are no definitions in Ephrem's works, only glimpses into possible understandings or

interpretations. For instance, when Ephrem uses the image of the pearl, in one instance it refers to one's virginity at baptism and at another it is in reference to Christ. The image of the betrothed is another such example, for it can refer to the Church, its clergy, and an individual believer. However, this is not to say that there are no consistent uses of symbols in his hymns or homilies. Lucid eyes and clean mirrors always represent the clean state of one's soul. Rather, what is being suggested here is that Ephrem's works possess a certain dynamic quality that fosters different understandings of his use of ascetic imagery. Interestingly enough, this dynamic literary quality works to produce a thematic structure that seems to run together: the Church into baptism, baptism into virginity, virginity into marriage, and so on: the common thread of all this being the ascetic goal of a life in imitation of Christ the *Īhidāyā*.

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